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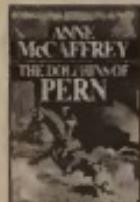
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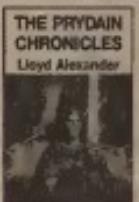
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JUNE • 46th Year of Publication

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COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "THE SPINE DIVERS"

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 0024-984X), Volume 88, No. 6, Whole No. 529, June 1995. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at \$2.75 per copy. Annual subscription \$26.00, \$31.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Second class postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1995 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

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# EDITORIAL

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## KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

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**T**HE READER responses to my February query have come in, and the responses have prompted two more editorials. This is the first.

In February, I detailed the results of the reader survey in the magazine and noted that the readership of the magazine is aging (along with the rest of science fiction's readership). Only 7 percent of our readership is under 25; most readers are over 35. This trend disturbs me. In the February editorial, I wrote:

"Some have suggested that this is because the entire population is aging. But I think we need to examine other possibilities. Is sf in a decline, like the western was a few years back? Are young people not reading anymore? Or has the literature of science fiction become more sophisticated, appealing to the more mature reader? I would love to get comments and opinions on this."

I got a lot of comments and opinions, which made for wonderful read-

ing for me. Respondents ranged from 71 years old to 15 years old, and all had thoughtful things to say. I can't reprint all of the letters—most go for two and three pages single spaced—but I can share some of the ideas, opinions and arguments. Since the correspondents tended to identify themselves by age or age group, I decided to divide the responses that way too. We start with the 25 and over group.

A number of respondents discussed (quite independently) something I focussed on in last month's editorial: adventure. Rick Norwood of Mountain Home, Tennessee, writes, "When I was a kid, I loved stories of adventure. I loved stories about outer space. I wanted the hero to win."

"Now, at 52, I prefer stories about the past. My favorite books are the sea stories of Patrick O'Brien. But I still want the hero to win."

"How many adventure stories does *FoS* publish? How many stories set in outer space? How many where the hero wins?"

U P D



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Louise Marley of Redmond, Washington, echoes that argument in her letter. "I'm the proud parent of a very gifted eleven-year-old who has read every Michael Crichton book (adult version) available since *Jurassic Park* came out. In addition, he reads many science fiction and fantasy novels, and they have one thing in common with *JP*: lots and lots of adventure.... In your editorial, you mention that 93 percent of your readership attended college, with more than a quarter having completed graduate school. I think it's too much to ask that a magazine that attracts and holds that sophisticated readership could also interest many under-eighteen-year-olds. Do the sf and fantasy stories that are selling these days have adventure? Certainly some do, but the genre has become increasingly sophisticated and challenging, idea stories rather than thrillers. I'll bet you don't buy a lot of space opera these days!"

Edward Nishida-Drake of Simi Valley, California, is a bit more blunt. He writes, "Your magazine and almost all others in this genre are aimed at adults. That, in and by itself, is not bad, for that is where your market lies. It is, in my opinion, a rather short-sighted marketing policy. By aiming your publication at an adult readership, you deny a younger gen-

eration the pleasures we had growing up in Science Fiction's golden era." He challenges the magazine to publish quality stories aimed at this younger age group. "Those of us who have been reading Science Fiction for a long time will enjoy these stories as nostalgia and as an added benefit we will attract the younger readers we need."

J. Michael Kelberer of Roseville, Minnesota, also notes the changing editorial focus of the magazines as a reason for the change. In his letter he examined several trends that "have conspired to reduce the 'sense of wonder' factor in current SF short fiction." In addition to what he calls "the mainstreaming of SF" (which other respondents discussed above), he adds two other trends.

First, he writes, "The rate of change in real-life technology is increasing while the rate of change in SF technology [sociology, etc] is slowing. The SF trend is toward near-futures with similar technologies [sociology, human capabilities] and non-futures [like today except for the main character's ability to talk to inanimate objects, for example]. Therefore the gap between real worlds and SF worlds is diminishing, and with it the sense of 'wow!'"

He also mentions "the recent emergence of near-future dystopias

(i.e. cyberpunk et. al) as the setting of choice for much speculative fiction...fail completely at cultivating the sense of wonder that made me a life-long SF reader."

Like J. Michael Kelberer, Jonathan S. Hudson of La Luz, New Mexico, makes several different suggestions in his letter. One of them is this: "Perhaps the change of which you speak is an unintended, long-term symptom of the widespread derision and disdain heaped upon my head by my contemporaries.... My acquaintances' charges of incipient idiocy because I was reading *that stupid science fiction junk AGAIN* successfully intimidated me."

Finally, our science columnist, Gregory Benford, adds a completely different perspective: "SF became a huge media phenom through *shared experiences* of the future: STAR TREK, then the continuing family-like adventures (sons and fathers, mostly) of STAR WARS. This taught a generation to seek the 'sci-fi' experience in this associative way, which isn't the root experience of reading

books or magazines. So the media parade missed the written medium. The hoped-for transference of STAR TREK book readers to mainline sf didn't happen.

"This relates to the unusual persistence of older writers in sf—Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury, Clarke. Here, too, readers prefer to go to the strange future in the company of somebody they know; it's reassuring.

"It suggests that the way to reach this enormous audience is to find a shared, quasi-communal vehicle. I wonder if this is even possible in magazines, though it might be in books."

All of these ideas, and the many more I received, provide great food for thought. In addition to letters, correspondents sent articles and several book references, all of which I will follow up on. I think this is an important topic, and one I will continue to explore.

Next month, I will share ideas from readers who identified themselves as part of the 25 and younger age group.



*In the ten years since National Book Award Winner Ellen Gilchrist last appeared in our pages (November, 1985), she has become one of the country's best loved authors. Her most recent book, *The Age of Miracles*, was published this spring by Little, Brown. She returns to F&SF with a frightening, all too plausible story which explores the end of the world in a strange new way.*

# Black Winter

*By Ellen Gilchrist*

I AM WRITING THIS FROM the cave, grandchild of mine, baby boy I left behind. If you live, if you are alive, over there, in Germany, where I pray the skies are clear. Strange, it began the day you were to be born. February 27, 1996, as we measured time. Will there be time when you read this? Is Europe there? Is anybody there?

I must not waste paper. We have ten bank envelopes and the notepad that was in the car and the grocery bag and *The Tulsa World*. We will learn to make paper, if we survive. We swore that last night, Tannin and I, when we divided up the paper that we have. I love you, James Ingersol Martin. If she really named you that, after what has happened. If you were born, if there is a world and you are in it. It is so dark here. There is light in the middle of the day for five or six hours sometime. We have a watch. A Timex I put on for a joke that morning. I never wore a watch. We almost bought a watch at Saks in Utica Square, also for a joke. We wish we had. And we wish we had bought the coffee we looked at there. Godiva Coffee,

Hazelnut, not to mention the candy we didn't buy. We might have had a pound of Godiva chocolates with us instead of the junk we did finally grab, in that last ten minutes, in the convenience store by the filling station.

We had gone to Tulsa to see *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, which was playing at Eton Square. I adore Stockard Channing. So does Tannin. Tannin McCaslin, from Nashville, Tennessee, age twenty-six, your grandmother's protege and best friend in this her sixtieth year to heaven. I am writing to you, James Ingwersol, because I think you are my best bet to be alive. The other ones are, or were, in the state of Mississippi. From the one conversation we have had in the last months, I don't think Mississippi is there anymore.

We still have a small amount of gasoline but we are afraid to use it, even to keep the battery in the car running. It's a terrible problem, trying to decide what to do about the gasoline. We're in Oklahoma, for God's sake. Surely we could find some gasoline if we looked for it. Unless it all blew up. We don't think the clouds look like they came from gasoline fires. They are thick and nearly cover the sky but have no smell.

We were about five miles from downtown Tulsa. We had stopped to get gasoline, on our way home from the movie. The sirens were going off everywhere. They didn't stop and I knew what they were. I had been watching the news. I knew what was going on in Russia, in North Korea, in Iran, in the Ukraine. Tannin had been writing all week. He wasn't well-informed. "Go in there and get some food," I said.

I'll say this for him. He didn't question me. "Get what?" he asked.

"Anything," I answered. "Run."

He ran. He came back in a few minutes with a sack of food. There had been no one to pay for it. Cars were driving strangely everywhere. I wanted Tannin to drive but I was behind the wheel. "Get out the map," I said. "Tell me how to go to the most desolate place outside of town."

"What's happening?"

"I think it's nuclear war."

"Take I-44. The Cherokee country is as desolate as it gets."

Then I drove. Did I mention the coat? I had just bought a full-length fur coat on sale at Saks. Tannin had bought some jeans and a summer sweater at

The Gap. That is a store we used to have, when Oklahoma was here. Eight months ago. When you were born. If you were born. I'm getting tired. I tire easily now. There's so little sun. So little food. I'll write more tomorrow. When there is light.

The sun came out for a while this morning. Tannin thinks the clouds are growing thinner. I think so too, in the day. In the afternoon it all seems so hopeless. We think we should go southwest, but in the desert is where we had the silos for our missiles. It might be worse there. Probably it's the air currents that matter most. We have drawn what we remember from television weather maps on the wall of a dry part of the cave. The currents changed all the time, of course, and the force of the explosions could have caused more changes. Not to mention the heat. We used to have clinical, rational discussions about such things. A few months ago. But now we are just trying to survive. We haven't given up. We just quit pretending to be left-brained.

This morning we had a chicken. Tannin catches them in the woods now and then. Traps them. There must have been chicken houses around here because the woods are full of chickens. They have grown very large and are quite noisy, nesting in the pine trees. It makes us sad to kill them. Also, we boil the meat until it is almost tasteless. I don't know what all this boiling is about. Radiation is not bacteria, but we are twentieth-century primitives and boiling is all we know to do. Tannin thinks we should stay inside as much as possible and cover our skin when we go out. His father and brother are physicists at Vanderbilt, or were. We don't talk about our families. We're going to talk about them, but not yet. But anyway, we boil those chickens to smithereens.

If we had been exposed to radiation we'd be dead by now. If we were exposed why would those chickens still be alive? Here is where we were after the sirens went off. In a convertible for an hour and forty minutes going east. Then in a stone church near Lincoln, Arkansas, for ten days. Then in the car for an hour. Then we were in the cave. But I need to go back to the beginning.

Tannin threw the sack of groceries in the car and I started driving. Most of the other cars had stopped. People were running into steel buildings. We drove I-44 to the Cherokee Turnpike. By then the radio stations were all

static. We had been listening to NPR. I thought that meant that New York and the east coast had been hit. There was never any reception after the sirens went off. Only static. "Don't drive too fast," was the only thing Tannin said. "We don't want to use up all the gas."

"Where should we go?"

"I don't know."

"Who is bombing us?"

"I don't know. North Korea. China."

"If we aren't at ground zero we want to get away from the prevailing winds. I think south is the best way to go."

"The turnpike only goes one way."

"We should find shelter, Rhoda. We shouldn't be in a convertible."

"I want to find a side road and head for the woods. There will be rioting. I don't want to be where people are."

"We'll be in Siloam Springs pretty soon. We could go to that park by Lake Wedington."

"We need to find a building."

"It might be too late for that."

"We didn't see a burst of light."

"Is this happening?"

"Just drive the car. Find us a place to hide."

Forty minutes later we were on a back road leading to Lincoln, Arkansas. It was a road I knew from when I had a hippie boyfriend. He had had friends who built themselves a sod house on this road.

The skies were clouding up. Nuclear fallout? We didn't know. Everything was ominous now. There were no cars anywhere. Where had all the people gone? Why were no cars on the roads? What had they seen on television that had made the houses and the roads so still?

Seven miles down county road 385 we found a stone church and decided to take shelter there. We pulled up to the door and unloaded part of our supplies and went inside and lay down on the floor.

"Is this happening?"

"Yes."

"Will we die? Are we going to die?"

"Maybe not."

"If we're radiated our skin will fall off. There will be holes in our skin."

"We didn't see anything. We didn't see the flash. Maybe it's just the east coast. It will take a while for the radiation to get here."

"It will blow here. It will blow everywhere. Where are all the people, Tannin? Why weren't there any cars on the roads?"

"They had television. They knew what to do."

"Our radio went out. Why would television stations be operating?"

"I don't know. I'm just guessing. We were right to leave the towns. There will be rioting. We have food and they will want it." I moved closer to him. He put his arms around me and we lay like that and talked and slept.

Here is what we had with us at that point. The car, with a tool kit and a small first aid kit. A waterproof car cover. A spare tire. Maps. Two sacks full of crackers and candy bars and beef jerky. Three quarters of a tank of 89 octane gasoline. A bottle of Evian. Ten Cokes. My new fur coat. The clothes we were wearing. Tannin's new sweater and jeans. A pair of running shoes and a pair of socks I had in the trunk of the car.

"We were right to leave Tulsa," we both kept saying. We knew it was true. There had been riots in cities all year. Ever since President Clinton was killed the dispossessed had rioted everywhere. I counted the trouble from the day the doctor killed forty people in the mosque on the West Bank, in the occupied territories, in Israel, at dawn. It had spread all over the world, in the near east, in South America, in Africa, in the United States. But why am I telling you this. If Germany survived you know all this. If this gets to you. If we ever get out of here. If you are there.

We don't know what to do. We don't know if we should go or stay. Still, the chickens are alive. They have grown very long tails, but Tannin says it's just because they are nesting in the trees and are free. They look like long-haired hippies. I think we should stop eating them. The meat is tasteless after it is boiled. There are roots and berries and nuts in the woods. But we are running out of other things to eat.

I will try to describe the darkness. It is like early November or March. There aren't clouds. It is all one cloud. From horizon to horizon. No break for ten days now. No wind. Tannin says that is good. He has started to use his left brain. So have I. It's very cold in the left brain and makes me click my teeth

together when I try as hard as I can to remember every practical and scientific thing I ever learned.

Three days of darkness have passed. We have kept track of every time the watch passes twelve. Now, finally, at two in the afternoon the sky has lightened up a bit to the south and west. There are pale shadows on the forest floor. We will mark the length of the shadow of the nearest tree. We will mark it each afternoon at two. Tannin is wearing a hooded garment made of the microfiber car cover and with a huge cover on his head. I don't think it makes any difference. I'm not sure, but I think radiation can go through anything, even steel. I think lead absorbs it but we don't have any lead except a little bit in some pencils and I'm not sure that's lead. I think it is against the law to put lead in pencils because kids chew on them in school.

Anyway, he puts on all this stuff and goes out to mark the shadow. He won't let me do it. I'm thirty years older than he is. I should be the one to take the chances.

Every day now the sunlight lasts longer. The cloud seems to be moving to the east and north. It has not rained and Tannin says that is good as the gamma particles will rain down on us and they are what carries the radiation.

I don't know what to think. I spend hours looking at my skin waiting for it to start falling off. It hasn't yet. We couldn't be this lucky, could we? Could we have lucked into being alive? It was totally nuts to drive that car for two hours and yet, here we are. With some food and a cave and a car and my fur coat and the woods full of living chickens.

We have a horse. Or, he has us. He came walking up wearing a torn gray horse blanket. We took it off of him and tried to mend it but we don't have a needle. It reminded me to find a needle if we ever go anywhere, or else learn how to make one out of bone. Our clothes won't last forever. Even the fur coat, which we take turns wearing at night or sometimes use for a blanket. That furcoat cheers us up. In the first place it is warm. In the second place I'll never have to pay for it. Mainly it makes us remember we could have had a pound of Godiva chocolate and a box of Godiva coffee if we had bought it. What I would really like is a baked potato and a steak. A bottle of orange juice. And I wouldn't mind some whiskey. I would really like some whiskey.

We make tea with different things we find. We are going to make some dishes soon. We might build a kiln if we decide to stay here. It's hard deciding what to do. I would take hikes to find out what's around here but Tannin doesn't think we should go outside unless we have to. He is painting a mural on the wall. It is a picture of us going to the movies. Sitting in seats eating popcorn and drinking Cokes and watching a screen. On the screen he drew the volcano from the movie we were seeing in Tulsa that afternoon. Stockard Channing in *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, by John Guare.

The horse doesn't do anything. He just hangs around. He has a halter on his face and I wanted to take that off too but Tannin said to leave it on. He is probably used to it and he has had enough changes in his life. I can't believe we don't go and see who is alive. What are we afraid of? What is there left to fear?

**W**E HAVE aspirin, hydrogen peroxide, merthiolate, antibiotic cream, sunscreen lotion, toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo. We found a canoe shop on the river ten miles from here. We had been searching for food. The thought of being in the cave all winter with nothing to eat scared us so much we had taken the car to look for food. We followed the road along the river and found the shop. There was a store with nothing touched. We almost killed ourselves eating things. There was sugar and honey and cookies and canned drinks and bottled water. There is enough stuff to take care of us for months. We packed everything we could into the car. Then we put a trailer hitch on the back of the car and loaded a canoe with the rest of the food and supplies and pulled the canoe back to the cave. We have a store of outboard motor oil.

We do not know where the people had gone. Why didn't they come back for the food? We will go back later and make sure there is nothing there that we can use.

Also, there were some guns. We took most of them and all the ammunition. We don't want anyone else to get hold of them.

We have a visitor. A biology teacher from Minnesota. He came on a motorcycle. His name is Mort Ricardo. He has books with him.

"What do you know?" we asked him.

"The east coast is gone," he answered. "And the south. People are living

in camps. There is nothing now, no government, no communication. You're lucky you're way out here."

"How did you find us?"

"I'm trying to go to the equator."

He is six feet three inches tall. He has brown hair and blue eyes. He has with him the King James Version of the *Bible*, *The Collected Works of William Shakespeare*, a calender of Florentine art. Tannin wept when he looked at it. It's the first time he's cried since this happened. He said it was because his mother took him to Florence when he was a child. As I said, we never talk about our families.

Mort has *The Orestia* by Aeschylus and a small anthology of British Poetry of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. He took what would fit in his saddlebags. He has dried food and lots of Bic cigarette lighters. He says it is going to be a long winter. His family was in Atlanta when it happened. He got on his bike and headed south. He is going to the equator with the books. There are other things. A medical textbook, an anatomy, a book of physics, an atlas. He thinks Europe is still there and maybe parts of central and south America. He is trying to figure out when it will be safe to cross Texas. He thinks he can find gasoline for a while, then he will walk the rest of the way. He's asleep now. He has talked to a lot of people between here and Minnesota. He says they are mostly holed up waiting to see what happens. He said there isn't going to be any more food in North America. Next year he says there probably won't be any.

Here is part of one of Mort's books. "The detonation of a nuclear weapon near the Earth's surface raises enormous quantities of dust into the atmosphere and causes deadly radioactive fallout. Nuclear fission of plutonium (and uranium), the process that triggers all nuclear explosions, creates dozens of unstable atomic nuclei that decay over periods of hours to years into more stable forms. In the act of decaying, the unstable nuclei release alpha, beta, and gamma radiation. Of these, the gamma rays — a very energetic but invisible form of light — are the most dangerous. Typically, gamma rays can penetrate a foot of concrete, one or two feet of dirt, or two or three feet of water. They come from two principal sources: the initial 'prompt' gamma rays produced during the nuclear explosion itself, and the 'delayed' gamma rays emitted during the radioactive decay of residual unstable chemical elements

synthesized in the explosion. The prompt gammas irradiate the region already subject to intense thermal radiation and blast effects. For this reason, their lethal effects are comparatively unimportant. Dead is dead; it doesn't matter if those killed by falling buildings or burned to death are also fried by gamma rays.

"The delayed gammas, however, are emitted by debris that can be carried by winds hundreds or thousands of miles from the explosion site before falling out or raining out of the air. The radioactive elements involved tend to condense onto dust particles. In the rising fireball of a surface nuclear detonation, the intimate mixing of surface particles swept into the fireball with the newly generated radioactive elements scrubs most of the radioactivity out of the air and onto the dust. Hence the radioactivity is distributed over a large area as the dust settles downwind of the detonation...." (Page 52, *A Path Where No Man Thought*.)

"Where were the explosions?" we had asked him. "Do you know what cities were hit?"

"The east coast. Nashville, Atlanta, North Carolina, Cincinnati," he kept on naming them. I think half of it was a guess. There has been mist here for several days now. Thick dark mist.

We are staying in the cave.

"If all the explosions were east of the Mississippi I think we have a chance," Tannin said.

"Then why is it so dark here?"

"It's lighter than it was. It was worse a few months ago."

"We were in a stone church, then in this cave," I told Mort. "I think we have a chance, don't you? If we had radiation poisoning we'd be sick by now."

"How thick were the walls of the church?"

"I'm not sure. Pretty thick."

"I think you lucked up so far." Mort put his chin on his hand. He looked from Tannin to me and back again. Then he sat up very straight. "You can go with me if you like," he said. "Just because it's been safe here doesn't mean it will stay that way."

"Why are you going to the equator? Tell us exactly why again."

"Because even a nuclear war can't push the earth off its axis. It will get colder and colder in this hemisphere. If life continues it will be near the equator. I want to see some children before I die."

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We have decided to go with Mort. We will pull the motorcycle behind the car on a trailer for the canoe. We will drive as far as we can. Then we will throw away everything but books and the needle and food and walk. Anything is better than staying here waiting for the chickens to start keeling over.

We will leave in ten days. I am starting to abandon things, our map on the wall, our calendar of days, our shadow marks outside the cave. I don't know what to do about the horse. The leaves on the trees are growing sparse. Vegetation is looking more like something in Alaska than Arkansas in late summer. And it is cold.

The more I think about the equator the better I like the idea. We have the guns if we need them. I might go out and shoot one one day soon. Just to make sure I know how. We have three rifles and seven handguns. We will only be able to keep this arsenal as long as we find gasoline. Mort says we will siphon it from abandoned cars or get it from farm supplies. He says all farms have tanks of gasoline and we will find some in Texas. There is a town called Appleton a few miles from here. I want to drive through that way and buy some apples if they have any left. It was just a tiny little town with orchards all around it. Tannin says he doesn't want to see orchards. He says there is a chance they will look like late Van Gogh and scare us all to death.

After we go through Texas we will come to the Atlantic Ocean. No matter what has happened the ocean will look like life and peace and purity. All my life I have loved the ocean. And all bodies of water. I want to dress in white for this journey. If I had a long white blanket I would make a pilgrim's robe of it. This is a pilgrimage, I guess.

October 30, 1996: Six Tibetan monks are here. They came walking down the path at noon yesterday, walking toward us as if they knew where they were going. They have been in Fayetteville and brought us news from there. They had gone there in late February to put on an exhibition of temple dances. It was part of a one hundred and ten city show to raise money for their new monastery in India. They are from Drepung Monastery in Lhasa which was destroyed in 1959 by the Chinese Communists. Their leader is Gangkar Tulku, recognized from childhood as the reincarnation of a high lama from Eastern Tibet. Gangkar speaks English, as does his second in command, Bhagang Tulku, also a high reincarnate lama. The others were all born in India after 1959.

Tannin and I were not surprised to see them. Lamas have come to Fayetteville before. There are several psychiatrists there who visit back and forth in India and Tibet. One of them had prayer flags flying in his yard and I saw them every day when I would ride my bike to the park in nice weather.

As soon as we saw them we went down the path to greet them. They were still wearing their red and saffron robes and sandals although they were also wearing large woolen shawls and warm hats and gloves. "How did you find us?" Tannin asked

"We asked where there were caves? We asked a geologist at the University. He drew us maps. We were looking for a place to begin a monastery. Are there other caves nearby that you have found?" They were standing in a circle now.

"Come inside," I said. "Have tea with us. We have tea we found in a canoe shop. We don't like to stay outside unless it's necessary. Come in. Tell us about the town."

"There was much rioting and disorder. People were living in the basements of buildings on the campus, afraid to go outside. We went with the people we were staying with, a doctor and his wife, to live in the basement of the physical science building. Some people with guns guarded the doors. The mayor and the head of the university were there with their families. The doctor who was our host went out each day to the hospital to care for people. There were many suicides, all during a week when the earth was dark."

"What did you hear of the rest of the United States?"

"There are people in the west who survived. Ham radio operators have sent messages. There is not much left east of the Mississippi. Not many cities left."

"What of the radiation clouds?" Mort asked. "Do you have information about them?"

"The worst went north-north-east, but there has been sickness many places. No one has invaded the country. There are still missiles in silos that could be sent against invaders. They say the nuclear submarines are still running. The NATO commanders command them now. The headquarters are in France. This is the news we heard."

"Why did you leave?"

"It was time for us to go and be alone. We have much to meditate upon."

"Stay with us," we said, almost in a breath. "There is food here. Did you bring food?"

"We have flour and oil. We will make bread for you in our skillet." One of the young monks pulled a copper skillet out from the folds of his robe. It was about six inches across, with a steel handle. I imagined the sweet flat bread being lifted from it. My heart went crazy at the thought of bread.

We sat in a circle and talked for many hours. Mort told them we were going to the equator. They listened very intently to all we told them.

"We're going to Mayan country," I put in. "The Mayans might be cousins of yours." I thought suddenly of my cousins. Of my family. It is not always possible to keep from thinking about them. Jimmy, Teddy, Malcolm, Little Rhoda, the names rang in my head.

"I will tell you a story," Gangkar Tulku said, as if he were reading my mind. He looked directly at me and stood up and began to play little cymbals on his fingers. "Once, long ago, mankind lived on another planet. On that planet he did not need to eat meat or vegetables. When he needed nourishment he looked up into the stars and the starlight fed him. At that time we were rainbows and could travel any distance in a few seconds. Some of us came to earth and saw the other creatures here eating and drinking meat and vegetables and we ate and drank with them to be polite. Because of this we became earthbound. Now only our minds are rainbows. Now our bodies cannot travel in the ether. Still, at Drepung Loseling Monastery we remember rainbow travel and put on our rainbow costumes and dance for one another and are not sad. How happy we are that our minds are still free to travel and tell each other stories."

It dried my tears to hear Gangkar's story. Perhaps my children and grandchildren are rainbows now. Perhaps the end was swift, unexpected, clean. Perhaps they live. No, they do not live. I must not think like that.

The monks have put a beautiful cloth painting of their monastery on our wall. It is painted on the lightest silk imaginable, but it is very strong. Gangkar showed me the paths that led from one part of the monastery to another. There had been seven to ten thousand monks there before the Chinese came.

They kneel in prayer for many hours each day. They are very careful of everything they eat, thanking and praising whatever gave up its life to feed them. I don't know what they think about peanut butter Nabs. That's a lot of different ingredients.

Tannin and I kneel with them as long as our knees can stand it. Mort likes them. He thinks it is good karma that they have shown up but he won't kneel with them. He has been busy with his instruments measuring the slant and amount of sunlight and monitoring the direction of the winds. He has several notebooks full of scientific data. We gave him one of the ones we found in the canoe shop.

Mort wants to take a trip to Fayetteville before we start for the equator but Tannin and I are afraid to. It was our home. I can't stand to see it ruined. I asked Gangkar and Bhagang about the children of Fayetteville. They said most of them have been gathered into the basements of the thickest buildings and are not allowed to go outside for anything.

"What do they do?"

"They play and study. They have an orchestra and put on plays and concerts. They are heavily guarded at all times."

I thought of the children I knew there who were especially dear to me. I thought of three children who were caught up in a terrible divorce on the day the nuclear devices ruined the world. Now the divorce would not matter to anyone. It would never come to court. They would never have to choose between their mother and their father.

Last night Mort spread out all his charts and talked to Gangkar and Bhagang about his theories. About atmospheric science and the destruction of ozone and how he thought the only place it would be warm enough to grow food would be near the equator.

I told them about the Mayan ruins in Mexico and Belize and how much they resembled the painting they showed us of their monastery.

"In short," Mort said. "Tannin and Rhoda and I would like you to go with us if you want to go. We will take the vehicles as long as the gasoline lasts. I think I can convert some of the motor oil but that will be a last resort. We can pull a trailer with supplies and any of you who won't fit into the vehicle. We will have to walk sooner or later but perhaps we will be in south Texas or Mexico by then."

"There's no point in staying here," Tannin added. "These woods are going to die."

"It will be an adventure," I put in. "We all have good walking shoes. I'm not worried about gasoline. As long as we are moving in the right direction.

We are going to the sun. That's how I look at it. Nine baboons searching for the sun. We want you with us if you will go."

That night the monks chanted for many hours. Then they had a long debate that lasted almost until dawn. They were in the front of the cave. I could have found a quiet place to sleep but I stayed awake listening to them.

At last they slept. In the morning, after they had gone outside and relieved themselves and boiled water for tea and drank tea and chanted for another two hours and then argued again, Gangkar came to us and said they had decided to accompany us to the equator.

"We have chanted away our hindrances," he began. "We see the joy in this new beginning. We embrace your journey and humbly offer ourselves as your companions. Only Bhagang is worried about your horse. What will you do with your horse? He cannot ride in the vehicles and if we leave him here he will perish without company. Have you thought of this?"

"We will drive slowly enough so that he can walk or run beside us," Tannin said.

"It will use too much gasoline," Mort answered.

"You can go ahead with the vehicle and we will follow at the pace of the horse," I suggested. We talked about this and Mort calculated the amount of gasoline it would take to drive forty miles an hour as opposed to fifty or thirty or sixty and we agreed that would be our plan.

"He is eating the grass," I added. "As long as he is alive we are not in a radiation zone. He will be our canary." The monks looked from one to another and smiled. I guess it amused them that I had to have an excuse to love a horse.

We have made our plans to leave. We will follow whatever roads we can down into Texas and Mexico. Then to Central America. Every two hundred miles we will have a meeting and re-think our plans.

"We will take the guns," Tannin told Gangkar. "We have rifles and pistols that we found in the canoe shop. I know this is against your religion so I wanted to warn you about it."

"Take what you need." Gangkar answered him. "If they become too heavy you may wish to stop carrying them."

We leave tomorrow. Tonight the monks performed their dances for us. The same dances they have performed in cities all over the world. They put on their costumes and danced:

THE INVOCATION OF THE FORCES OF GOODNESS  
then,

THE DANCE OF THE RAINBOW BEINGS  
then,

THE INQUIRING AND PROVOKING MIND IS THE BASIS OF ALL  
ENLIGHTENMENT

then,

THE WORLD OF CONFLICT AND SUFFERING BECOMES THE  
CIRCLE OF ECSTASY

then,

THE ECHO OF WISDOM

then,

AN AUSPICIOUS CONCLUDING SONG FOR WORLD PEACE

It was very beautiful although I fell asleep several times during the chanting. Afterward I lay down on my soft bed that Tannin made for me from rushes and moss and canoe rugs and slept on it for the last time. I dreamed all night of rainbow people. I named them all the names of the people east of the Mississippi River whom I had loved. Mother, father, sister, brother, child, friend. Then I got up to finish this and wrap it in plastic and leave it here for you. Whoever you will be. It doesn't matter to me anymore who you will be. Undifferentiated consciousness. That's what I'm striving for. We must finish packing now. We must be moving on.





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# BOOKS

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## ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

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*Résumé with Monsters* by William Browning Spencer, The Permanent Press, 212pp, \$22.00 (The Permanent Press, Noyac Road, Sag Harbor, NY 11963)

*The Unnatural* by David Prill, St. Martin's Press, 256pp, \$21.00

**E**VERY age develops its own distinctive figure of villainy. In Dickens's time it was the wealthy miser, making life miserable for honest citizens and common workingfolk. Some decades later foreigners assumed the miser's role; the Yellow Peril threatened comfortable European civilization, and bellicose Martians burned London before lowly bacteria foiled their invasion. Later still it was the enemy within, body-snatchers and puppet masters who symbolized fears of brainwashing and political treachery. In today's post-industrial, post-colonial, post-cold-war world, another threat has moved to the forefront (and no, I don't mean serial

killers). The faceless, impersonal Corporation now frequently wears the black hat — bringing villainy back again to the miser, in a way.

Nowhere in literature is this clearer than in science fiction and fantasy. William Gibson and his imitators give us dark futures dominated by unscrupulous megacorporations, companies so large and diversified they wield more power than nations (and wield it far less humanely, in most cases). Megacorps dominate space and press Native Americans into bonded servitude in Jack Dann and Jack C. Haldeman II's *High Steel*. An opportunistic capitalist and his powerful corporation nearly ensure the destruction of the planet in John Barnes's *Mother of Storms*. In sf, corporations are most often the enemies of individual freedom, of the environment, of privacy, of decency and humanity and fair play. (I should mention, though, Poul Anderson's *Harvest of Stars* as a significant exception; his Fireball Enterprises is the world's greatest hope, a friendly meritocracy governed by the enlight-

ened dictatorship of its founder, Anson Guthrie—but I think Fireball and the naive laissez-faire capitalist ideal it embodies is one of the things that gives *Harvest of Stars* its oddly retro feel.)

It's not hard to understand why corporations get such a bad rap—they're pretty easy to hate, with their stuffy conformist culture and their ruthless pursuit of their own self-interest. Most anyone who's worked for a large company has felt a sense of powerlessness in the face of a vast inhuman force arrayed against them...

...but few of us have recognized what the hero of William Browning Spencer's latest novel, *Résumé with Monsters*, sees: that many corporations are in fact intrusions into our world of Lovecraftian monsters from Beyond, furthering the unspeakable ends of fearsome Cthulhu, his dread messenger Nyarlathotep, and other horrors from the Outer Dark.

Philip Kenan, "a middle-aged, lovesick, failed novelist and near-obsolete typesetter," works the night shift at Ralph's One-Day Résumés. He's come to Austin, Texas, following his former girlfriend, Amelia, hoping to win her back, but he's haunted by his memories of "the doom that came to MicroMeg," where he and Amelia once worked.

That doom, in Philip's recollection, involved "the ancient, implacable curse" of the Great Old Ones. Trouble is, no one else remembers it that way, least of all Amelia, who thinks Philip's novel (which, coincidentally, focuses on Lovecraftian themes) has seeped into his real life, firing an overactive imagination.

At first Spencer's blend of cosmic horror and office banality seems purely comic (if on the black side), as Philip maintains his vigilance for signs of the minions of Cthulhu at Ralph's ("the bathroom...while crypt-like and dank, contained no hideous disorienting graffiti from mad Alhazred's *Necronomicon*") amid office scenes only slightly exaggerated for effect: "A paste-up artist was sobbing while a secretary shrieked on one of the phone lines." He continues to plug away at his novel, and calls Amelia as often as she'll let him (once a week). Early on he gets himself a friendly therapist who, when he blurts out his fears of "hideous cone-shaped creatures from outer space," comments blithely, "You are going to be an interesting client."

Spencer delights in satirizing the casual malevolence of middle-managers and small business owners, the inexplicable strangeness of co-workers, the laughable idiosyncrasies of office life. "Offices were random

collections of people," he writes, "washed aground on islands of limited resources, battling for sustenance. Philip had seen grown men wrestle over a stapler." Philip's paychecks come with offensive little motivational pamphlets such as "Maintaining a Positive Attitude," "Be a Team Player," and "You Matter!" [which exhorts its readers that, while they may be rather insignificant themselves, their "labor can benefit someone who is, in fact, genuinely important"]. He recalls the boredom of his long string of jobs, from copy shops to insurance companies to temp assignments, where he took on "tasks of such stupefying tedium that the regular employees could not be coerced into performing them even under threat of being fired." A few passages make it clear that *Résumé with Monsters* takes a rather dim view of the workplace; but who among us has never worked with someone like old Mrs. Meadows, "who believed that her co-worker, an equally ancient woman, plotted against her and slept with the boss"?

There's even a neat little capsule spoof of *The Bridges of Madison County*. Philip receives an insipid bestseller from his mother—titled *A Wind Through My Heart*, but its true identity is never in doubt—which of course sends the frustrated author

further into despair, realizing that his own book ("probably half a million words and its vision was bleak") has little hope in a market so taken with such tripe.

But amidst all the humor a more serious thread runs. Philip's therapy uncovers several dark episodes of his past: disturbing sexual advances from a man who'd hired him to mow his lawn, the accidental overdose death of his wife (and the unhappiness of the marriage which preceded it), and worst of all his memories of his father, beaten down by the frustrations of a dead-end career, drunk and abusive, who killed himself when Philip was still a boy. The more we learn the more Philip's monsters seem to be delusions, symbols of his encroaching mid-life crisis, figures of his lingering childhood guilt—and the more his negative attitude toward work begins to look like a response based on his father's complaints about "the System" that eventually killed him. (Philip frequently equates "the System" with Yog-Sothoth and other horrors.) In fact until the very end of the book we never know for certain whether the monsters really exist or not.

And yet, even as these more serious aspects of the book deepen, *Résumé with Monsters* never loses its bleakly humorous edge. It's hard to say exactly how a novel about a man's mid-

life despair can be funny; the juxtaposition of workplace ennui and Lovecraftian horrors certainly produces a pervasive sardonic tone, but even the scenes that aren't played for satirical laughs have a kind of exaggerated emotional quality (like that of Lovecraft's own fiction) that adds a note of grim humor to even the darker scenes. The motivation pamphlets conjure a "black miasma of despair" in Philip, which makes it hard to take more serious moments *entirely* seriously, as when he thinks about his love for Amelia: "There was no comfort in the statement, which was, in truth, only an acknowledgement of the increasing scope of his dread." Something about the term "dread" seems to belong more comfortably to the world of Cthulhu than that of Ralph's One-Day Résumés; all of Philip's emotions have that heightened, almost hysterical aura.

This tension between the serious undercurrents of the story and its comic "high-concept" surface — an office love story with Cthulhu, it's *Desk Set* meets *The Shadow Out of Time* — might have worked against the book in the long run, but when we finally get to see Philip's memories of what happened at MicroMeg, Spencer works a narrative magic that makes the inclusion of Lovecraftian monsters more than a mere gimmick (entertaining though it is). MicroMeg

is a nightmare of the worst in corporate culture, where the real horrors of office life come to seem far more terrifying than the slithering tentacled things from Beyond. It's a place of totalitarian security measures and bad cafeteria food, a smarmy gung-ho office newsletter and mountains of unnecessary paperwork. The most egregious example of MicroMeg's corporate mentality, the time accountability tables (on which employees are required to record their activities for each six-minute interval during the day), isn't so very far from the extremes to which some real-world corporations still go (urine test, anyone?). By the time Philip uncovers the unholy rites on which the corporation is founded, it's almost a relief, a more palpable and therefore tolerable horror after the soul-numbing impersonality of the MicroMeg daily grind, which makes it all the easier for us to see how Philip might have deluded himself into concocting monsters rather than face more years at the company.

Back in Austin, Philip shares the reader's feeling. "Life had occasionally seemed hopeless when vast, malignant creatures were manipulating humanity for their own inscrutable purposes," he muses, "but the monsters now seemed trumped by the unbearable weight of daily

existence. Reality's bored visage... this was more dreadful than the star-shaped face of Cthulhu himself." That's when he determines to brave the corporate horrors and rescue Amelia from the clutches of the new company she's taken a job with.

If there's any significant problem with this disturbing and delightful book it's here toward the end. Spencer leaves the darker side of the story — Philip's upsetting past — behind; the tone of the later chapters remains resolutely light, though they aren't nearly as funny as the earlier parts of the book. (This I think is a common difficulty with humorous novels, and movies and plays for that matter — when it comes time to wrap up the plot and tie up the many loose ends, it's hard to keep the jokes running.) Philip's problems are swept away by a pair of events which I won't detail here, for fear of giving everything away, but I will say that a happy ending which never seems to address the very serious roots of Philip's *anomie* feels a tad hollow.

But this is a minor complaint in the scheme of things. Read *Résumé with Monsters* for its rare and skillful blend of satire and seriousness, and for the many precious moments of precise observation that give Spencer's work its particular power: when Philip, recalling a scene from

his past, thinks, "This may have been one of those details created by a memory more in love with aptness than with accuracy," we can see the acumen Spencer brings to this tale of monsters and bosses (monstrous bosses?) which might otherwise have amounted to little more than an amusing extended joke.

Read *Résumé with Monsters* and see if you don't start checking the bathrooms at your office for "hideous disorienting graffiti" and other signs of the presence of the Old Ones. If there's one thing Spencer makes plain, it's that if Azathoth and other Lovecraftian horrors do intrude into our plane of existence, they're probably handing out paychecks.

David Prill's first novel, *The Unnatural*, takes on a similar theme by adopting an equally bizarre premise. There are no corporations *per se* here standing in for the evils of the modern world (though the corporate empire of the midget Drabford Brothers does smack of MicroMeg here and there), but young Andy Archway gets caught between the pull of his own private dreams and the pressure of the Big Time and, like Philip, must find a way to navigate past the Scylla and Charybdis of the System to find some measure of happiness.

If this were actually a baseball

novel, Andy would have a fiery fastball and an unhittable curve, honed by years of practice out back of the barn. It would be the classic tale of a young talent brought up too soon to the majors, where he finds that the pleasures of baseball — the reason he started playing in the first place — are quickly overwhelmed by the pressures of fame, politics, and money of the professional game.

But it's not a baseball novel. Andy's got a farm-fresh, home-brewed talent all right, but his playing field is the embalming table, and his tools are pumps and trocar rather than ball and mitt. In Prill's odd world, embalming occupies a place in American culture akin to that of major league sports. Kids grow up dreaming of contracts with big undertaking firms such as the Drabfords' conglomerate or their chief rival, P.T. Sunnyside. They collect pulp magazines such as *Respectful Casket Tales*. They spend summers at embalming camp. Scouts from the big firms prowl the byways of the nation searching for untapped talent. It's about the strangest "alternate" world I've ever encountered, particularly because so little else is changed, and the embalming mania fits in so well...

Prill wastes no time in letting us know we're no longer in Kansas. (In fact, we're in Golbyville, Minnesota,

Andy's home town, but it's not the Minnesota we know.) He offers us first a note "About the Record," introducing us to the legend that is Janus P. Mordecai, holder of the world embalming record, having tended to 1,769 corpses in the "season" of 1942. This is the man Andy Archway grows up idolizing, and when he chances to meet the once great man at the Minnesota State Fair (Mordecai now performs on-the-spot embalming as a sideshow act), all he can think to say is, "'I'm going to break your record!'" And so his dream is born.

Years later Andy's still on his parents' farm, where he practices his art in a shed, when Wallace "Wake" Wakefield, talent scout for P.T. Sunnyside, happens by. Andy's no garden-variety embalmer, as Wake quickly learns; he sets his corpses up in imaginative dioramas depicting the deceased engaged in some favorite activity from life. Wake sees the kid's promise immediately, and signs him to a contract, including a scholarship to The Thomas Holmes University of Embalming and Funerary Practices. Andy's on his way.

But Andy begins to encounter problems right away. He's shocked to find that his creative layouts are received with horror and disdain by his casketing class, that to succeed he'll have to stifle his natural talents

and practice the rigid, uninteresting accepted methods. (It's a great moment when, seeing one student's design after another looking so similar, Andy's first thought is "Plagiarism!") School is redeemed for Andy, though, when he tries out for the varsity embalming team, where he quickly demonstrates his ability and helps lead the team to a championship. The coach's pep talks are priceless: "It's one thing to embalm in the privacy of your own office or home," he tells his players, "but when you've got five thousand fans screaming at the top of their lungs and you see the clock ticking down, three, two, one, why by God then you find out if you've got guts in your belly or just sawdust."

Andy spends the summer interning at P.T. Sunnyside's California headquarters, working on Heaven Hill, a sort of theme-park necropolis Sunnyside has under construction (the deceased can be interred in western-style Frontiersville, the chrome and glitter Futureville, or the antiquated pomp of Egyptville). Sunnyside seems more like Andy's sort of place, Heaven Hill like his own dioramas writ large, and P.T. himself is an amiable sort who takes great interest in Andy's ideas. If he can just get through the next year at Holmes U., it seems he'll be able to

## Congratulations to our 1994 award winning authors:

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put his unique talents to work at Sunnyside.

But that's where the Big Time steps in. Andy's success with the embalming team brings him fame and rekindles his dream of beating Mordecai's record; when the Drabford Brothers make a pitch to steal Andy away from Sunnyside, offering him a chance to go for the record, he caves in, breaks his contract, and joins the Drabford empire.

Like *Résumé with Monsters*, *The Unnatural* has a lot of fun with its whacko premise — my particular favorite is the learning-to-read book that appears toward the end ("A is for

airtight, what the casket should be; B is for burial, so deep you can't see"). Like Spencer, Prill also develops a serious theme beneath the humor, though it never gets so dark as Spencer's. Oddly, though, in *The Unnatural* the serious thread actually becomes dominant in the later going, breaking the story out of its satirical tone.

The Drabfords send Andy to the country of Soma (Somalia?), where they think he'll have the best chance of breaking Mordecai's record. People are starving to death left and right in Soma, so Andy's got plenty of material to work with. At first Andy's horrified by the desiccated bodies he receives, and protests, but the dream burns within him, so he smothers his doubts in a frenzy of work. I won't say whether he breaks the record or not, but while in Soma Andy does get a first-hand look at the horrors of dying, and, in one of the ubiquitous tent hospitals, he even discovers in himself the urge to help the living, rather than merely tending to the dead. He feels the driving obsession with embalming fade within him. "The desire, that innate instinct to create something beautiful out of a cold, cold form was gone...he knew he could still perform the task physically — his knowledge and skill were certainly still intact — but the *need* had faded."

That's the beginning of Andy's journey back to himself, back to the

pleasure he derived from embalming before Wake ever recruited him. Returned to the U.S., he turns down an offer to become partners in a new venture with P.T. Sunnyside, and instead outfits an old trailer as a mobile embalming unit. Andy takes to the road, driving off into the sunset, at peace with himself, his talent, and the world.

Prill resolves the tensions in Andy's character in a way that Spencer does not resolve Philip's, and yet *The Unnatural* never transcends its gimmick the way *Résumé with Monsters* does. Embalming never assumes the character of a psychological symbol or metaphor, the way Spencer's monsters do. But we find in the end that we don't mind. Prill's sure hand keeps the tone of *The Unnatural* pitched just right to prevent us from feeling at all disappointed in the end, and even leaves room for Andy's story to assume some genuinely touching dimensions. But for the interlude in Soma, it keeps its balance of humor from start to finish.

And to top it all off, it may be the weirdest thing you read all year. Then again, who's to say? With major league sports striking on every side, souring fans and sullying their own tarnished images still further, maybe embalming could actually become a mass-culture phenomenon. Heck, a kid's gotta have a hobby, and it'd probably be pretty easy to get season tickets....





# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

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*The Armless Maiden and Other Tales for Childhood's Survivors*, edited by Terri Windling, Tor Books, 1995, 382pp, \$22.95, hardcover.

**I**FIND myself in an uncomfortable position in regards to reviewing this anthology.

Normally in these pages I would never discuss a book I'm involved with because I don't think it's fair to use this forum to promote something from which I stand to profit. I also stay away from books that others associated with this magazine are involved with for the same reason. But I find that this time I have to review a book in which both I and *F&SF* editor Kris Rusch have stories because for one thing (let's ignore my and Kris's contributions for the rest of this review) the quality of the stories, poems and essays is so high, but more importantly, I believe that the themes and issues dealt with in *The Armless Maiden* are too crucial

for me not to do all I can to promote it.

There are so many books published these days, and far too many of them slip between the cracks and disappear, unseen, unread, forgotten. I'd hate to think that the readership of this column might miss this anthology, so I've broken my own rule, but made a compromise by stating my bias up front, and I hope you will understand that I am sincerely trying to recommend a very worthwhile project to you—not merely attempting to see a larger royalty check. (Although with that said, I have to add that I do hope that sales of this book are tremendous because its editor Terri Windling and many of the authors, myself included, are donating their profits to various agencies offering shelter, counseling, and medical care to abused children and I'd like to see the coffers of those agencies stuffed to overflowing.)

From the above you might gather that this is an anthology that tackles a grim subject — and you'd be right.

For many of us, childhood was hell, a dark forest in which few found a fairy tale helper to aid them in their journey into adulthood. And unfortunately, the situation hasn't changed today, for all the media blitz on abused children. Too many children still live in dangerous environments and too little is done to help them.

For some people in the creative arts, the issue has become a convenient foil to explain a past trauma in the lives of their characters — much in the same way that the rape/revenge scenario was used when female characters took the lead in sword & sorcery and fantasy stories a number of years ago. And much has been written, pro and con, in discussion of the victim mentality, how we deal with child abuse, suppressed memories and the like — so much so, some say, that they wish writers would find a new hobby horse to ride.

The trouble is, the issue won't go away. And until it does, we need to maintain an honest dialogue about it. We have to speak the words aloud, point the finger, give no rest to the issue until all children are allowed to grow up in the warm safety that so many don't. But we also have to offer solace and hope and support to those who have suffered this trauma, to those who are suffering it even as you read these words.

And that's the strength of this anthology, that it addresses both the issues and how we can deal with their aftermath, doing so with a lyric beauty, a startling resonance, a truthful eye and an empathic warmth as magical and reassuring as any fairy godmother. These stories say: You are not alone. It wasn't/isn't your fault. There *are* people who care. They say: You can survive. You can be strong. You have nothing to be ashamed of.

There are those who view fantasy, and in particular fairy tales, as nothing more than escapism. They've bought into the Disney versions, believed the Victorians when they tidied the stories up and relegated them to the nursery. Even today there are those who feel that children should be protected from the darker aspects of fairy tale: Let them enjoy their childhood, why remind them of what a terrible world it can be, they'll find out soon enough on their own.

What they forget is that fairy tales are learning journeys, with lessons far more palatable than the pathetic easy answers offered up to us in sitcoms and the like. That without the darkness, there is no light. That children need to be prepared for what they will find later in life. That the sharp contrast between right and wrong in fairy tales will help them

sor through the gray morass that is the real world. That in a time when our heroes are movie stars, rock stars and sports figures who fail us time and again, we need real heroes to look up to. The Robin Hoods and Donkeyskins and Brave Tin Soldiers of the old stories are not simply plucky individuals, quaint, perhaps enchanting, but certainly outdated now; they served, and can still serve, as real role models, ones that won't let us down.

Fairy tales, like myths and folk tales, give us the tools with which to deal with adulthood. And yes, they can be an escape, but far too often it's not an escape from something good, but to something good. As Windling writes toward the end of the book in an essay describing her troubled childhood: "Fairy tales were not my escape from reality as a child; rather they were my reality—for mine was a world in which good and bad were not abstract concepts, and like fairy-tale heroines, no magic would save me unless I had the wit and heart and courage to use it wisely."

And in the next paragraph she quotes Jane Yolen, no stranger to readers of this magazine: "Just as a child is born with a literal hole in his head where the bones slowly close under the fragile shield of skin, so the child is born with a figurative hole in his heart. Slowly this, too, is filled

up. What slips in before it anneals shapes the man or woman into which that child will grow. Story is one of the serious intruders into the heart."

It's no surprise that cultures based on an oral tradition use stories to instruct their young. What is a surprise is that our culture has allowed itself to forget the use of stories, to consider them merely entertainment, without real intrinsic worth. So we have a literary tradition (Classic Literature), and one based on entertainment (which includes genre fiction), but what the classifiers seem to forget is that the stories that endure, that become Great Literature, are entertaining as well. Shakespeare and Dickens grip the reader in the same way that a fairy tale does a child, but if they were published today would probably be relegated to genre status.

So the real question is, should the stories we tell our children be watered-down, vacuous safe excursions, or should they encompass the full breadth of the world into which our children have been born — a world of beauty and darkness, humor and drama; a world that holds the life lessons and values that so many speak of, yet so few truly follow?

The material to be found in *The Armless Maiden* is a return to such learning stories. Some are for a more mature audience, remembering old

lessons, sharing experience, empathizing; others — for all their dark woods — speak to both child and adult as the best of the old fairy tales do. Go back and read some of the original versions of the fairy tales you remember today and you might be surprised to discover that the lessons in them aren't lumps of medicine, roughly coated with story sugar. They grow out of the moral choices of the characters and the results of those choices.

And that's what the material in this anthology does so well, in prose, verse and essays. The stories they tell can be grim or enlightening, sometimes both; they can illuminate the shadows and cast down the ogres and giants. They do so by lending the reader sympathy and moral strength and the knowledge that they're not alone — whether the reader is a victim, or someone concerned with children's rights.

One final point. Many potential readers might think that an anthology such as this will be a grim, depressing read. Not so. It's a journey on which you will find all aspects of the human condition illuminated, a journey that leads not into darkness, but through it and away from it, into hope. As Windling writes in her introduction, "While it is the usual anthology reader's practice to read

stories in a random order, I hope you will consider letting this book lead you on a path from start to finish, into the woods and out again."

The stories do just that, form a kind of continuous narrative that I think will surprise as many of the contributors (working individually, with no idea as to what the others were up to) as it did myself.

I have made little mention of those contributors. Some are well-known authors (Lynda Barry, Tanith Lee, Patricia A. McKillip, Joanna Russ, Peter Straub, Jane Yolen); others are less well-known in our field or appear here for the first time (Dr. Annita Harlan, Sonia Keicz, Munro Sickafoose, Silvana Siddali, Ellen Steiber, Gwen Strauss, Windling herself with fiction under her own name). But all of them have contributed to the tapestry of Windling's vision with a singular quality and, in some cases, bravery with the stories they've told, and how they've told them.

The only quibble I have with anything in the anthology is the notion of forgiveness that arises in one or two of the pieces, such as the title story. The concept baffles me. People who batter children and rape babies don't deserve to be forgiven. They deserve only to be ostracized from all contact with human society. And therapy's not an answer either.

Therapy is for sick people; abusers are evil — there's a difference. Evil doesn't know remorse and can't be cured. All it does is hide away until the next time it can strike.

As I said earlier, I hope readers will be as drawn to the narrative that threads through this book as I was. I hope it raises lots of money for those agencies that are helping our children. But mostly I hope that it will do something to address the issues that appear in its pages — address them in

the here and now, so that today's and tomorrow's children will be spared the hurt and grief suffered by too many of those who came before them. Or as Windling so ably puts it, "To make violence against children, sexual or otherwise, completely unacceptable."

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2. 

YOU MAKE DECISIONS ALL DAY  
NOW IT'S TIME TO RELAX!  
LET FATE DECIDE.

## The OUIJA MENU



*Kristine Kathryn Rusch's most recent novel, Alien Influences (Orion/Millennium), has been nominated for Britain's Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction novel. Bantam Books will publish the novel in the States late next year. Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling's Year's Best Fantasy and Horror anthology will reprint Kris's story, "Monuments to the Dead" (which appeared in Tales from the Great Turtle from Tor).*

*She wrote "Spirit Guides" at the suggestion of Peter Crowther who will publish the story in his Heaven Sent anthology (Daw) later this year.*

— E.F.

# Spirit Guides

*By Kristine Kathryn Rusch*

L

OS ANGELES. CITY OF THE  
Angels.

Kincaid walked down Hollywood Boulevard, his feet stepping on gum-coated stars. Cars whooshed past him, horns honking, tourists gawking. The line outside Graumann's Chinese clutched purses against their sides, held windbreakers tightly over their arms. A hooker leaned against the barred display window of the corner drug store, her makeup so thick it looked like a mask in the hot sun.

The shooting had left him shaken. The crazy had opened up inside a nearby Burger Joint, slaughtering four customers and three teenaged kids behind the counter before three men, passing on the street, rushed inside and grabbed him. Half a dozen shots had gone wild, leaving fist-sized holes in the drywall, shattering picture frames, and making one perfect circle in the center of the cardboard model for a bacon-double cheeseburger.

He'd arrived two minutes too late, hearing the call on his police scanner on his way home, but unable to maneuver in traffic. Christ, some of those

people who wouldn't let him pass might have had relatives in that Burger Joint. Still and all, he had arrived first to find the killer trussed up in a chair, the men hovering around him, women clutching sobbing children, blood and bodies mixing with french fries on the unswept floor.

A little girl, no more than three, had grabbed his sleeve and pointed at one of the bodies, long slender male and young, wearing a '49ers T-shirt, ripped jeans and Adidas, face a bloody mass of tissue, and said, "Make him better," in a whisper that broke Kincaid's heart. He cuffed the suspect, roped off the area, took names of witnesses before the back-up arrived. Three squads, fresh-faced uniformed officers, followed by the SWAT team, nearly five minutes too late, the forensic team and the ambulances not far behind.

Kincaid had lit a cigarette with shaking fingers and said, "All yours," before taking off into the sun-drenched crowded streets.

He stopped outside the Roosevelt, and peered into the plate glass. His own tennis shoes were stained red, and a long brown streak of drying blood marked his Levis. The cigarette had burned to a coal between his nicotine stained fingers, and he tossed it, stamping it out on the star of a celebrity whose name he didn't recognize.

Inside stood potted palms and faded glamor. Pictures of motion picture stars long dead lined the second floor balcony. Within the last ten years, the hotel's management had restored the Roosevelt to its 1920s glory, when it had been the site for the first ever Academy Award celebration. When he first came to LA, he spent a lot of time in the hotel, imagining the low-cut dresses, the clink of champagne flutes, the scattered applause as the nominees were announced. Searching for a kind of beauty that existed only in celluloid, a product of light and shadows and nothing more.

*El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula.*

The City of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula.

He knew nothing of the Angels of Porciuncula, did not know why Filipe de Neve in 1781 named the city after them. He suspected it was some kind of prophecy, but he didn't know.

They had been fallen angels.

Of that he was sure.

He sighed, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a grimy hand, then returned to his car, knowing that home and sleep would elude him for one more night.

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Lean and spare, Kincaid survived on cigarettes, coffee, chocolate and bourbon. Sometime in the last five years, he had allowed the LAPD to hire him, although he had no formal training. After a few odd run-ins and one overnight jail stay before it became clear that Kincaid wasn't anywhere near the crime scene, Kincaid had met Davis, his boss. Davis had the flat gaze of a man who had seen too much, and he knew, from the records and the evidence before him, that Kincaid was too precious to lose. He made Kincaid a plainclothes detective and never assigned him a partner.

Kincaid never told anyone what he did. Most of the cops he worked with never knew. All they cared about was that when Kincaid was on the job, suspects were found, cases were closed, and files were sealed. He worked quietly and he got results.

They didn't need him on this one. The perp was caught at the scene. All he had to do was write his report, then go home, toss the tennies in the trash, soak the Levis, and wait for another day.

But it wasn't that easy. He sat in his car, an olive Green 1968 Olds with a fading pine-shaped air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, long after his colleagues had left. His hands were still shaking, his nostrils still coated with the scent of blood and burgers, his ears clogged with the faint sobs of a pimply-faced boy rocking over the body of a fallen coworker. The images would stick, along with all of the others. His brain was reaching overload. Had been for a long time. But that little girl's voice, the plea in her tone, had been more than he could bear.

For twenty years, he had tried to escape, always ending up in a new town, with new problems. Shootings in Oklahoma parking lots, bombings in Upstate New York, murders in restaurants and shopping malls and suburban family pickups. The violence surrounded him, and he was trapped.

Surely this time, they would let him get away.

A hooker knocked on the window of his car. He thought he could smell the sweat and perfume through the rolled-up glass. Her cleavage was mottled, her cheap elastic top revealing the top edge of brown nipple.

He shook his head, then turned the ignition and grabbed the gear shift on the column to take the car out of park. The Olds roared to life, and with it came the adrenaline rush, hormones tinged with panic. He pulled out of the parking space, past the hooker, down Hollywood Boulevard toward the first freeway intersection he could find.

Kincaid would disappear from the LAPD as mysteriously as he had arrived. He stopped long enough to pick up his clothes, his credit cards, and a hand-painted coffee mug a teenaged girl in Galveston had given him twenty years before, when she mistakenly thought he had saved her life.

He merged into the continuous LA rush hour traffic for the last time, radio off, clutching the wheel in white-knuckled tightness. He would go to Big Bear, up in the mountains, where there were no people, no crimes, nothing except himself and the wilderness.

He drove away from the angels.

Or so he hoped.

Kincaid drove until he realized he was on the road to Las Vegas. He pulled the Olds over, put on his hazards and bowed his head, unwilling to go any farther. But he knew, even if he didn't drive there, he would wake up in Vegas, his car in the lot outside. It had happened before.

He didn't remember taking the wrong turn, but he wasn't supposed to remember. They were just telling him that his work wasn't done, the work they had forced him to do ever since he was a young boy.

With a quick, vicious movement, he got out of the Olds and shook his fist at the star-filled desert sky. "I can't take it anymore, do you hear me?"

But no shape flew across the moon, no angel wings brushed his cheek, no reply filled his heart. He could turn around, but the roads he drove would only lead him back to Los Angeles, back to people, back to murders in which little girls stood in pools of blood. He knew what Los Angeles was like. Maybe they would allow him a few days rest in Vegas.

Las Vegas, the fertile plains, originally founded in the late 1700s like LA, only the settlement didn't become permanent until 1905 when the first lots were sold (and nearly flooded out five years later). He thought maybe the city's youth and brashness would be a tonic, but even as he drove into town, he felt the blood beneath the surface. Despair and hopelessness had come to every place in America. Only here it mingled with the cajing-jing of slot machines and the smell of money.

He wanted to stay in the MGM Grand, but the Olds wouldn't drive through the lot. He settled on a cheap tumble-down hotel on the far side of the strip, complete with chenille bedspreads and rattling window air conditioners that dripped water on the thin brown indoor-outdoor carpet. There he slept in the protective dark of the blackout curtains, and dreamed:

Angels floated above him, wings so long the tips brushed his face. As he watched, they tucked their wings around themselves and plummeted, eagle-like, to the ground below, banking when the concrete of a major superhighway rose in front of them. He was on the bed, watching, helpless, knowing that each time the long white tailfeathers touched the earth, violence erupted somewhere it had never been before.

He started awake, coughing the deep racking cough of a three-pack-a-day man. His tongue was thick and tasted of bad coffee and nicotine. He reached for the end table, clicking on the brown glass bubble lamp, then grabbed his lighter and a cigarette from the pack resting on top of the cut-glass ashtray. His hands were still shaking, and the room was quiet except for his labored breathing. Only in the silence did he realize that his dream had been accompanied by the sound of the pimply-faced boy, sobbing.

It happened just before dawn. A woman's scream, outside, cut off in mid-thrum, followed by a sickening thud and footsteps. He had known it would happen the minute the car had refused to enter the Grand's parking lot. And he had to respond, whether it was his choice or not.

Kincaid paused long enough to pull on his pants, checking to make sure his wallet was in the back pocket. Then he grabbed his key and let himself out of the room.

His window overlooked the pool, a liver-shaped thing built of blue tile in the late fifties. The management left the terrace lights on all night, and Kincaid used those to guide him across the interior courtyard. In the half-light, he saw another shape running toward the pool, a pear-shaped man dressed in the too-tight uniform of a national rent-a-cop service. The air smelled of chlorine and the desert heat was still heavy despite the early morning hour. Leaves and dead bugs floated in the water, and the surrounding patio furniture was so dirty it took a moment for Kincaid to realize it was supposed to be white.

The rent-a-cop had already arrived on the scene, his pasty skin turning green as he looked down. Kincaid came up behind him, stopped, and stared.

The body was crumpled behind the removable diving board. One look at her blood-stained face, swollen and bruised neck, her chipped and broken fingernails and he knew.

All of it.

"I'd better call this in," the rent-a-cop said, and Kincaid shook his head, knowing that if he were alone with the body, he would end up spending the next few days in a Las Vegas lock-up.

"No, let me." He went back to his room, packed his meager possessions and set them by the door. Then he called 911 and reported the murder, slipping on a shirt before going back outside.

The rent-a-cop was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The air smelled of vomit. Kincaid said nothing. Together they waited for the Nevada authorities to show: a skinny plainclothes detective whose eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and his female partner, busty and official in regulation blue.

While the partner radioed in, the rent-a-cop told his version: that he had been making his rounds and heard a couple arguing poolside. He was watching from the window when the man backhanded the woman, and then took off through the casino. The woman didn't get up, and the cop decided to check on her instead of chasing the guy. Kincaid had shown up a minute or two later from his room in the hotel.

The plainclothes man turned his flat gaze on Kincaid. Kincaid flashed his LAPD badge, then told the plainclothes man that the killer's name was Luther Hardy, that he'd killed her because her anger was the last straw in a day that had seen him lose most of their \$10,000 savings on the Mirage's roulette table. Even as the men spoke, Hardy was sitting at the only open craps table in Circus Circus, betting \$25 chips on the come line.

Then Kincaid waited for the disbelief, but the plainclothesman nodded, thanked him, rounded up the female partner and headed toward Circus Circus, leaving Kincaid, not the rent-a-cop, to guard the scene. Kincaid rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger, trying to stop a building headache, feeling the rent-a-cop's scrutiny. Kincaid could always pick them, the ones who had seen everything, the ones who had learned through hard experience and crazy knocks to check any lead that came their way. Like Davis. Only Kincaid was new to this plainclothesman, so there would be a hundred questions when they returned.

Questions Kincaid was too tired to answer.

He told the rent-a-cop his room number, then staggered back, picked up his things and checked out, figuring he would be halfway to Phoenix before they discovered he was gone for good. They would call LAPD, and Davis

would realize that Kincaid had finally left, and would probably light a candle for him later that evening because he would know that Kincaid's singular talent was still controlling his life.

**L**IKE A HICK tourist, Kincaid stopped on the Hoover Dam. At eight A.M., he stood on the miraculous concrete structure, staring at the raging blue of the Colorado below. An angel fluttered past him, then wrapped its wings around its torso and dove like a gull after prey. It disappeared in the glare of the sunlight against the water, and he strained, hoping and fearing he'd catch a glimpse as the angel rose, dripping, from the water.

The glimpses had haunted him since he was thirteen. He'd been in St. Patrick's Cathedral with his mother, and one of the stained glass angels left her window, floated through the air, and kissed him before alighting on the pulpit to tickle the visiting priest during mass. The priest hadn't noticed the feathers brush his face and neck, but he had died the next day in a mugging outside the subway station at 63rd and Lexington.

Kincaid hadn't seen the mugging, but his train had arrived only a few seconds after the priest died.

Years later, Kincaid finally thought to wonder why he hadn't died from the angel's kiss. And, although he still didn't have the answer, he knew that his second sight came from that morning. All he needed to do was look at a body to know who had driven the spirit from it, and why. The snapshots remained in his mind in all their horror, surrounded by faces frozen in agony, each shot a sharp moment of pain that pierced a hole in his increasingly fragile soul.

As a young man, he believed he could stop the pain, that he had been given the gift so that he could end the horrors. He would ride out, like St. George, and defeat the dragon that had terrified the village. But these terrors were as old as time itself, and instead of stopping them, Kincaid could only observe them, and report what his inner eye had seen. He had thought, as he grew older, that using his skills to imprison the perpetrators would help, but the deaths continued, more each year, and the little girl in the Burger Joint had provided the final straw.

*Make him better.*

Kincaid didn't have that kind of magic.

The angel flew out of the wide crevice, past the canyon walls, its tail feathers dripping just as Kincaid had feared. Somewhere within a two hundred mile radius, someone would die violently because an angel had brushed the earth. Kincaid hunched himself against the bright morning, then turned and walked along the rock-strewn highway to his car. When he got inside, he kept the radio off so that the news of the atrocity would not hit him when it happened.

But the silence wouldn't keep him ignorant forever. He would turn on the TV in a hotel, or pass a row of newspapers outside a restaurant, and the information would present itself to him, as clearly and brightly as it always had, as if it were his responsibility, subject to his control.

The car led him into Phoenix. From the freeway, the city was a row of concrete lanes, marred by machine-painted lines. From the sidestreets, it had well-manicured lawns and tidy houses, too many strip restaurants and the ubiquitous mall. He was having a chimichanga in a neighborhood Garcia's when he watched the local news and realized that he might not hear of an atrocity after all. He finished the meal and left before the national news aired.

He was still in Phoenix at midnight, and had not yet found a hotel. He didn't want to sleep, didn't want to be led to the next place where someone would die. He was sitting alone at a small table in a high class strip joint, sipping bourbon that actually had a smooth bite instead of the cheap stuff he normally got. The strippers were legion, all young, with tits high and firm and asses to match. Some had long lean legs and others were all torso. But none approached him, as if a sign were flashing above him warning the women away. He drank until he could feel it—he didn't know how many drinks that was anymore—and was startled that no one noticed him getting tight.

Even drunk, he couldn't relax, couldn't laugh. Enjoyment had leached out of him, decades ago.

When the angel appeared in front of him, he thought it was another stripper, taller than most, wrapped in gossamer wings. Then it unfolded the wings and extended them, gently, as if it were doing a slow-motion fan dance, and he realized that its face had no features, and its body was fat and nippleless like a butterfly.

He raised his glass to it. "You gonna kiss me again?" His thoughts had seemed clear, but the words came out slurred.

The angel said nothing — it probably couldn't speak since it had no mouth. It merely took the drink from him, and set the glass on the table. Then it grabbed his hand, pulled him to his feet, and led him from the room like a recalcitrant child. He vaguely wondered how he looked, stumbling alone through the maze of people, his right arm outstretched.

When the fresh air hit him, the bourbon backed up in his throat like bile. He staggered away from the beefy valets behind the potted cactus, and threw up, the angel standing beside him, still as a statue. After a moment, he stood up and wiped his mouth with the crumpled handkerchief he kept folded in his back pocket. He still felt drunk, but not as bloated.

Then the angel scooped him in its arms. Its body was soft and cold as if it contained no life at all. It cradled him like a baby, and they flew up until the city became a blaze of lights.

The wind ruffled his hair and woke him even more. He felt strangely calm, and he attributed that to the alcohol. Just as he was getting used to the oddness, the angel wrapped its wings around them and plummeted toward the ground.

They were moving so fast, he could feel the force of the air like a slap in his face. He was screaming — he could feel it, ripping at his throat — but he could hear nothing. They hurtled over the interstate. The cars were the size of ants before the angel extended its wings to ease their landing.

The angel tilted them upright, and they touched down in an empty glass-strewn parking lot that led to an insurance office whose door was surrounded by yellow police tape. He recognized the site from the local newscast he had caught in Garcia's: ever since eight that morning, the insurance office had been the location of a hostage situation. A husband had decided to terrorize his wife who worked inside and, although shots had been fired, no one had been injured.

He stared at the building, felt the terror radiate from its walls as if it were a furnace. The insurance company was an old one: the gold lettering on the hand-painted window was chipped, and inside, he could barely make out the shape of an overturned chair. He turned to ask the angel why it had brought him there, when he realized it was gone.

Kincaid stood in the parking lot for a moment, one hand wrapped around his stomach, the other holding his throbbing head. They had flown for miles. He still had his wallet, but had no idea where he was or how he would find a pay phone.

And he didn't know what the angel had wanted from him.

He sighed and walked across the parking lot. The broken glass crunched beneath his shoes. His mouth was dry. The police tape looked too yellow in the glare of the streetlight. He stood on the stoop and peered inside, half hearing the voices from earlier in the day, the shouts from the police bullhorn, the low tense voice of the wife, the terse clipped tones of her husband. About noon the husband had gone outside to smoke a cigarette — his wife hated smoke — and had shot a stray dog to ward off the policeman who had been sneaking up behind him.

Kincaid could smell the death. He followed his nose to the side of the building. There, among the gravel and the spindly flowerless rose bushes, lay the dog on its side. It was scrawny and its coat was mottled. Its tongue protruded just a bit from its open mouth. Its glassy eyes seemed to follow Kincaid, and he wondered how the news had missed this, the sympathy story amidst all the horror.

The stations in LA would have covered it.

Poor dog. A stray in life, unremembered in death. Just standing over it, he could see the last moments — the enticing smell of food from the police cars suddenly mingled with the scent of human fear, the glittery eyes of the male human and then pain, sharp, deep, and complete.

Kincaid crouched beside it. In all his years, he had never touched a dead thing, never felt the cold lifeless body, never totally understood how a body could live and then not live within the same instant. In the past he had left the dead for someone else to clean up, but here no one would. The dog would rot in this site of trauma and near-human tragedy, and no one would take the care to bury the dead.

Perhaps that was why the angel brought him, to show him that there had been carnage after all.

He didn't know how to bury it. All he had were his hands. But he touched the soft soil of the rose garden, his wrist brushing the dog's tail as he did so.

The dog coughed and struggled to sit up.

Kincaid backed away so quickly he nearly fell. The dog choked, then coughed again, spraying blood all over the bushes, the gravel, and the concrete. It looked at him with a mixture of fear and pain.

"Jesus," Kincaid muttered.

He pushed himself forward, then grabbed the dog's shoulders. Its labored breathing eased and its tail thumped slightly against the ground. Something

clattered against the pavement, and he saw the bullet, rolling away. The dog stood, whimpered, licked his hand, and then trotted off to fill its empty stomach.

Kincaid sat down in the glass and gravel, staring at his blood-covered hands.

Phoenix.

A creature of myth that rose from its own ashes to live again.

He had been such a fool.

All those years. All those lives.

Such a fool.

He looked up at the star-filled desert sky. The angel that had brought him hovered over him like a teacher waiting to see if the student understood the lecture. He couldn't relive his life, but maybe, just maybe, he could help one little girl who had spoken with the voice of angels.

*Make him better.*

"Take me back to Los Angeles," he said to the angel. "To the people who died yesterday."

And in a heartbeat, he was back in the Burger Joint. The killer, an overweight acne-scarred man with empty eyes, was tied to a chair near the window, a group of men milling nervously around him, the gun leaning against the wall behind them. All the children were crying, their parents pressing the tiny faces against shoulders, trying to block the sight. The air smelled of burgers and fresh blood.

A little girl, no more than three, grabbed Kincaid's sleeve and pointed at one of the bodies, long slender male and young, wearing a '49ers T-shirt, ripped jeans and Adidas, face a bloody mass of tissue, and said, "Make him better," in a whisper that broke Kincaid's heart.

Kincaid crouched, hands shaking, wishing desperately for a cigarette, and grabbed the body by the arm. Air whistled from the lungs, and the blood bubbled in the remains of the face. As Kincaid watched, the face returned, the blood disappeared and a young man was staring at him with fear-filled eyes.

"You all right, friend?" Kincaid asked.

The man nodded and the little girl flung herself in his arms.

"Jesus," someone said behind him.

Kincaid shook his head. "It's amazing how bad injuries can look when someone's covered with blood."

He didn't wait for the response, just went to the next body and the next, his need for a cigarette decreasing with touch, the blood drying as if it had never been. When he got behind the counter, he gently pushed aside the pimply-faced boy sobbing over the dead coworker, and then he paused.

If he reversed this one, they would have nothing to indict the killer on.

The boy's breath hitched as he watched Kincaid. Kincaid turned and looked over his shoulder at the killer tied to the chair near the entrance. Holes the size of fists marred the drywall and made one perfect circle in the center of the cardboard model for a bacon-double cheeseburger. It would be enough.

He grabbed the body's shoulders, feeling the grease of the uniform beneath his fingers. The spirit slid back in as if it had never left, and the wounds sealed themselves as they would on a video tape run backwards.

All those years. All those wasted years.

"How did you do that?" the pimply-faced boy asked, his face shiny with tears.

"He was only stunned," Kincaid said.

When he was done, he went outside to find the back-up team interviewing witnesses, the ambulances just arriving, five minutes too late.

"All yours," he said, before taking off into the sun-drenched crowded streets.

Now he had to keep moving. No jobs with police departments, no comfortable apartments. He had to stay one step ahead of a victim's shock, one step ahead of the press who would someday catch wind of his ability. He couldn't let them corner him, because the power was not his to control.

He was still trapped.

He stopped outside the Roosevelt, lit a cigarette, and peered into the plate glass. His own tennis shoes were stained red, and a long brown streak of drying blood marked his Levis. The cigarette had burned to a coal between his nicotine-stained fingers before he had a chance to take a drag, and he tossed it, stamping it out on the star of a celebrity whose name he didn't recognize.

All those years and he never knew. The kiss made some kind of cosmic sense. Even Satan, the head of the fallen angels, was once beloved of God. Even Satan must have felt remorse at the pain he caused. He would never be accepted back into the fold, but he might use his powers to repair some of the pain he caused. Only he wouldn't be able to alone, for each time he touched

the earth, he would cause another death. What better to do, then, but to give healing power to a child, who would learn and grow into the role.

Kincaid's hands were still shaking. The blood had crusted beneath his fingernails.

"I never asked for this!" he shouted, and people didn't even turn as they passed on the street. Shouting crazies were common in Hollywood. He held his hands to the sky. "I never asked for this!"

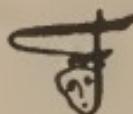
Above him, angels flew like eagles, soaring and dipping and diving, never coming close enough to endanger the Earth. Their featureless faces radiated a kind of joy. And, although he would never admit it, he felt that joy too.

Although he would not slay the dragon, he wouldn't have to live with its carnage either. Finally, at last, he could make some kind of difference. He let his hands fall to his side, and wondered if the Roosevelt would shirk at letting him wash the blood off inside. He was about to ask when a stray dog pushed its muzzle against his thigh.

"Ah, hell," he said, looking down and recognizing the mottled fur, the wary yet trusting eyes. He glanced up, saw one angel hovering. A gift then, for finally understanding. He touched the dog on the back of its neck, and led it to the Olds. The dog jumped inside as if it knew the car. Kincaid sat for a moment, resting his shaking hands against the steering column.

A hooker knocked on the window. He thought he could smell the sweat and perfume through the rolled-up glass. Her cleavage was mottled, her cheap elastic top revealing the top edge of brown nipple.

He shook his head, then turned the ignition and grabbed the gear shift on the column to take the car out of park. The dog barked once, and he grinned at it, before driving home to get his things. This time he wouldn't try Big Bear. This time he would go wherever the spirit led him.



We are always pleased to have a Jack McDevitt story in our pages. His most recent story for us, "Glory Days," appeared in our August, 1994 issue. He has been nominated for the Hugo and Nebula awards, and his story "Ships of the Night" won the Polytechnical University of Catalunya Novella Award in Spain in 1993. Ace/Berkeley published his most recent novel, *The Engines of God*.

About "Cruising through Deuteronomy," Jack writes, "I woke with the idea on a Sunday morning, after having gone to bed thinking how everything looks best when you can't see it too clearly: misty rivers, heroic acts, moonlit women. Time travel stories usually focus on the paradox, instead of on their genuinely scary aspect: clearing away the mist."

# Cruising through Deuteronomy

*By Jack McDevitt*

**T**HE BANGING SOUNDED like distant thunder.

Cardwell was slow to move, had in fact been sitting in the dying firelight, allowing the storm to carry away his gloomy mood. Rick padded barefoot from the kitchen through the hallway and opened the front door. The wind blew louder.

There were whispers in the hall, and an authoritarian voice that he did not recognize. Rick appeared. "Dad," he said. "You have a visitor."

A tall, severe figure followed the boy into the room. Cardwell saw at once that he was a clergyman, one of those advanced types that affect plaid jackets. He was quite tall, with intense dark eyes contrasted against a bland smile. He shook rain off his hat and coat, and held them out for Rick. "Dr. Cardwell?" he asked, coming forward.

Cardwell heaved himself out of his chair. "You have the advantage of me, sir."

"I'm Pastor Gant." His glance swept the room, and registered diffident approval. "From the Good Shepherd Church over in Bridgeton." He said it as if it explained his visit.

Cardwell debated whether he could leave him standing. But his breeding got the better of him, and he indicated a chair. "What can I do for you, Pastor?"

"I'll come right to the point if you don't mind." He sat down and held his hands out to the fire.

"Yes. Good. Can I offer you a brandy?"

He waved the idea away with a choreographed gesture. His fingers were long and graceful. "No, thank you. I'm not opposed to drink on principle, you understand. But I prefer to abstain."

Rick, whose boredom with Cardwell's inner circle was usually painfully obvious, took a chair where he could watch.

Pastor Gant reached into his pocket, and took out precisely what Cardwell had expected: the clipping from last Tuesday's *News*. He held it toward the firelight, and looked at it as though it were vaguely loathesome. "Is there actually anything to this?" he asked.

"The Displacer?"

"The time machine."

"The story is correct in its essentials."

"I see." The long fingers toyed with the paper. He turned toward the boy. "Son," he said, "perhaps it would be best if you left the room."

Rick didn't stir, but Gant did not seem to notice.

"Pastor," said Cardwell, "I don't want to be abrupt, but I'm really quite preoccupied at the moment."

"Yes, I'm sure you are." He crossed his legs, and let his head drift back. "Doctor, you must understand that the people of my church are good people."

"I'm sure they are."

"But life can be very harsh. Several, at this moment, are bearing up under terminal illnesses. Another has recently lost a child. Just about your son's age, I might add. Still another —"

"Might I press you to come to the point?"

"Of course." He looked not quite substantial in the flickering light. "The only thing that keeps us going, when life becomes —" he searched for a word, " — difficult, the only thing that sustains us, is our sure and certain knowledge of a divine protector."

Cardwell's stomach began to hurt. "Reverend," he said, "I'd be pleased to discuss all this with you at a future date."

Gant stared into the fire, as if his host had not spoken. "You will take all this from them, Doctor."

Cardwell frowned. There'd been some minor fuss over that article. Fortunately, the limited circulation of the *News*, and the general tendency of people in the area to mind their business had however protected him. "I hardly see how that can be," he said.

"You know what will happen if you complete the device?" He rose from his chair and towered over Cardwell. His eyes grew very large and very black. "You will cruise through Deuteronomy. Glide across Numbers. Descend into Exodus. There were no trumpets at Jericho, you will say. No angel at Sodom. No division of the Red Sea. No haircut for Samson." His smile lengthened at that, but there was no warmth in the gesture. "You will say there was no Fall, and hence no need for a Redeemer. You will travel into the sacred country and every time you return you will bring with you a cargo of despair. I simply cannot allow that to happen." He drew a small revolver from his pocket and pointed it at a spot between Cardwell's eyes.

Rick gasped and started forward. But his father, with a quick jerky wave, stopped him.

"I'm sorry," said the pastor. It was hard to see his expression in the play of light and shadow. "I truly am." He studied the weapon. "It is often difficult to know the right thing to do."

Cardwell could not take his eyes from the gun. It amazed him that a stranger would come into his home and threaten to use one on him. The entire world centered in the round black muzzle. "You're too late," he said.

Gant's gaze shifted. Bored into him. "What do you mean?"

"I've already done it. I've made the flight. Several, in fact."

"I don't believe you."

"Did you really think I'd let the newspapers have the story if I weren't sure? And there's only one way to be sure." He eased himself back into his chair. Anything to get out from in front of that muzzle. And he was relieved to see that when it followed him, it locked onto his right knee. "There is a prototype, George. Your name is George, isn't it?"

That surprised him. "How did you know?"

"I pass your church every day on my way to the campus. Your name is prominently displayed."

"I wish that you might have seen fit to come by and say hello."

Cardwell nodded. "Possibly I've been remiss."

"I'm surprised you would see that." Gant's brow furrowed.

"How could I not? *Pastor, I've been on the ark.*"

The rain hissed against the windows. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Then why are you here? Either you believe it's possible, or you don't. If you don't, I'd like to know why you're threatening my life."

Gant stared at him. He seemed to be having trouble breathing. "Is it really true?"

"Yes, it's true. I've walked her decks. Felt her roll in the swell of the storm. Seen the tigers in their bays."

The gun came up. Swung a few degrees. Cardwell realized it was pointed at Rick. "Stay back," said Gant. "I don't want to shoot you." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Indeed, I wish there were a way to do this without shooting anyone."

"Then believe me," Cardwell said desperately.

The pastor stared at him for a long moment. "Noah," he said.

"Yes?"

"Did you talk to him?"

"I didn't know the language. I saw him."

The hand wavered.

"Listen to me. I was at the foot of the mountain when Moses returned with the Tablets. I saw him shatter them against the rocks. I watched Solomon give judgment and walked through his temple. I stood a few feet from David when he killed the Philistine. I was in the crowd when Jesus delivered the sermon on the mount."

Perspiration glittered on Gant's forehead. "You're lying," he said. "You're mocking me. And blaspheming everything that's holy. You're a non-believer. I know about you. I've read what you've written."

Cardwell smiled gently. "That was true once. George, I was on the shore during the storm when the Master stepped out of the boat. I looked into His eyes."

The pastor tried to speak, but only strangled sounds got out.

"Gant, do you, at last, not believe?" His voice rose until it was one with the wind beating at the window. "Where is your faith?"

The gun clattered to the floor. A sob welled up in Gant's throat, and he fell forward into Cardwell's arms and almost knocked him down. But Cardwell held on, and the pastor embraced him. A log popped and fell into the fire.

"Thank you," said Gant, finally, wiping his cheek. "I was terribly wrong to come here. Not to see what would happen." His face brightened, and he squeezed Cardwell's shoulders again. "I hope you'll come by the church and share your experience with all of us." And, without stopping for hat, coat, or gun, he walked straight out of the house.

When he was gone, they locked the door. "Dad," Rick said, "you were terrific."

"Thanks."

"Are you going to call the police?"

"Maybe in the morning. Let me think about it."

"I was scared."

"So was I, kid."

The boy picked up the weapon and put it on a bookshelf. He grinned. "The displacement principle doesn't work, right? You told me that yesterday. The time machine won't ever get off the ground."

"That's right."

The boy's eyes gleamed. "Don't you have any respect at all for the truth, Dad?"

"Sometimes I think truth is overrated," said Cardwell. "On that one, I believe I'm with the Christians. My money's on *faith*."



Tanith Lee last appeared in F&SF in August of 1992. Since then she has been publishing a wonderful series of novels for Dell Abyss.

"These Beasts" is also a dark tale. "The idea for the plot," she writes, "is actually my husband's (writer John Kaiine). But he made the mistake of telling me about it around midnight, and although I didn't actually have nightmares, by the following morning I had enough notions of how the story could go. I asked him if I could have it, and he generously agreed."

# These Beasts

By Tanith Lee

from an idea by John Kaiine

**H**E WAS A TOMB ROBBER. Well, when you were dead, you were dead. All came to it. The mighty in their gold and gems, the impoverished unknown, wrapped in rags, their legs broken to fit the grave. And even he, Carem, would one day die. He did not mind if someone robbed him, after death. Welcome, my friend.

It was this life that counted.

Oh, he had been born as no one in the splendid city among the pink rocks. Noom Dargh, once the seat of kings, but no longer. He had been a whore's son, sold at three months to be another whore. At ten, evading the man who was his owner—spuriously charming, as Carem had learned to be, they all trusted him—he made off with traders. He was quick as fire. Handsome too.

Among the traders he learned his profession.

The caravan routes went all ways. And in the yellow deserts, stood up the strange bulbous stones, caught forever in mid-topple. "What is that place?" "Ah, we will show him." It was a place of tombs.

They went by night. No moon. Things howled in the desert, but he was not afraid. No, not until they breached the stinking hotness of the rock and the bats, which laired there, poured outward — Then the man who liked Carem consoled him. "There's nothing here to hurt you. But look — what's that which shines?" What shone was gold, contrary to so many proverbs.

By the time he was a man, Carem had gained much knowledge, and some wealth. Let it be said, the wealth came from others and the knowledge was all to do with thievery. But Carem did not harm the living. No, he was kind to them. He gave to beggars in the street, and was generous with the girls he dighted.

By his twenty-eighth year, he had a house on the edge of Noom Dargh, a house with gardens and channels of water, a house with courtyards and dove-cotes, and awnings embroidered by gold.

He had also two wives, Bisint, who was rich, and Zulmia, who was beautiful.

In the city they spoke of him with respect. No one publicly remembered anymore what he did. Indeed, he did not do it, for now other men worked on his behalf, and brought him treasures by night through a secret walk in the starry garden.

Lucky Carem. A life from death.

One sunset as, half a mile away below his mansion, the city turned blood-red and the desert scarlet, someone came seeking Carem; would speak only to him.

They met on a shady terrace and drank fig wine.

"I hurried straight to you, sir," said the visitor, a traveler from antique lands. "You alone could do it."

"Do what?"

"Get in, get out. It needs skill and wisdom. It needs knowledge of such things."

"What things are they?"

The traveler smiled. "They call yours a bestial career, but I say one does what one is good at."

"You mean my shares in merchant enterprise."

"No. Your tomb-robery."

Carem said, smiling too, "Have I been insulted?"

"Not at all. You're known as a master. And this, believe me, who would not dare it, needs a master's touch."

"You may explain. For purposes of amusement. If I laugh enough, you shall have gold to fill one hand, and sufficient silver to fill two."

"Treble that. You will find you'll laugh your head off, Lord Carem."

Then the traveler spoke of an ancient country, once astride the world, and now come down to ruination. Its great obsession, this land, had been the burial of its kings and princes — of whom there were many — in the most sumptuous and enduring manner. And, too, in deepest secret. Now and then one of these burial spots would be thought to have been discovered. Then everyone went mad. And, often as not, since they were usually also wrong, venturers came back with nothing but sore bones and empty wallets.

"This *I* have, however," said the traveler, "is not only sure — and I can give you proof — it is infallible. Besides which, it is known. Spoken and dreamed of, a thing of sparkle and nightmare."

"Is there the normal curse, then, on the tomb?" asked Carem, indolently. Had he been a fox, his ears would have stood up high enough to touch the awning overhead.

"A curse known as familiarly as the tomb. Indeed, the tomb is named for it. There in the waste beyond the pastures of the River Khemory."

"Oh, is it Stone-Beard's Palace? That was pillaged three years ago. So I've been led to believe."

"Not there."

"The Garden of Arches, then? That too. And only a wisp of gold got from it."

"Not there."

"More wine?" inquired Carem. "A cake?"

"Yes, I will take more wine. The burial place I offer you is the Tomb of the Black Dog."

Then Carem, despite the last trace of the sunset, paled. His eyes opened and closed, and opened. He said, "Surely that is only a story."

"Till now. Now it can be yours."

"And your proof."

Then the traveler took a purse out of his clothing and out of the purse he drew a narrow gleaming snake. This he set on the terrace, where, after two or three convulsive movements, it brought up out of its jaws a small black egg.

The egg sat on the paving.

The traveler spoke a word that fell like a raw hot drop of unseasonal rain.

The egg burst, and there lay a tiny black figure of a dog at rest, its head erect, and its throat rimmed by gold.

"A copy of the image that guards the tomb?"

"Found in the sand not twenty paces from the area."

Muttering a protective charm, Carem picked up the figurine and held it. It was unearthly cold. He put it down. It cast no shadow, turn it as he would.

"Tell me all you know," said Carem.

The traveler did so. Presently much gold and silver was given over in handfuls.

At midnight they parted, the traveler and Carem, and Carem went prudently to sleep with his plain wife, Bisint, for in the morning he would be going away.

**T**HE JOURNEY to Khenemy took several months, longer than was ordinarily needful, since Carem undertook the end of it in disguise, as a poor lame pilgrim, seeker of the shrines of the holy river.

Many tiresome days Carem spent, smothered by dust and ringing his irritating little pilgrim's bell at the gates of collapsed temples, until at last, moved apparently by that mystic urge which drives prophets and seers, he wandered out into the desert waste.

The desert of Khenemy was like no other.

Where the River was, emerald pastures swelled, with cows and cameloids feeding beneath palms heavy with dates, and lime green banana trees. Then there lay the strips of fields, and sacred groves, and thereafter the first of the waste, brown as an egg, where, in caves, the former inhabitants of old fallen cities lived, lighting at night their fires and lamps of horn, like yellow stars felled to the land.

After this, a place opened that was like hell.

The land was white, and blistered the soles through your boots, the sun was a ball of white matter, and the sky white, and here and there rose monuments of the race of Khenemy, which had passed away. Statue men a hundred feet tall, wielding swords of stone, towers and gateways that led nowhere, all blasted by a hot moistureless wind, the breath of something long dead.

Carem, though, had a map. Not to hand, but written accurately in his head.

So he trekked by day the burning waste, and slept by night under the suns of other indifferent worlds. And on the second evening, he reached a sort of cliff. And in the eastern front of it was a mark, that looked only natural, but not to him. It was like the face of a dog.

No time like the present

Carem went to the cliff and stared hard, and saw how the rock was.

Then he put up his agile right "lame" foot, and lifted himself. From the first step he discovered the second. They were set oddly, and were not safe. He negotiated them all, with only a little powdering of dust to show his passage.

Above, far up, the cliff was flat as a stone table.

Once there, it was possible to look for miles, and see nothing but the nighttime desert, with here and there, one of its ghastly monuments.

Instead Carem looked and saw a hag seated by a round hole in the stone.

"Stay," said the hag. "Let me tell you what you risk."

"Very well," said Carem.

"Once I was very young," said the hag.

"That might be said of all of us."

"I traveled here," continued the hag humorlessly. "I sought to enter the Tomb of the Black Dog. Aieee! I did not know. I thought it the burial place of some great king, guarded by that fearsome guardian, Anubar, the Biter of Souls."

Carem nodded.

The hag said, "Know, it is the Tomb of the Black Dog Himself. So we discovered to our cost. He Himself lies buried here, that guardian invoked in so many other places."

Carem shivered, but it was only the heat.

"Thus all of you died, granny, and you're a ghost."

"Nay," said granny, "me alone He let live. But see," and she opened her robe with her left hand to reveal horrid scars and omissions. "He tore off my right arm and my right breast. I am His warning."

"Thank you," said Carem. "Now you have warned me you may be off."

The hag got up and walked away. She cast no shadow. That too the Black Dog had torn from her. She went down the cliff by another way, invisible to ordinary persons.

Oh, he was not alarmed. Not Carem.

He sat by the black hole in the stone and took a pipe from his garments. On this he blew. It made no noise.

It would sound however a few hours' journey away, at the spot to which he had earlier sent the men who would help him at the tomb. He had now merely to wait.

He first anointed himself from a phial, then stretched out in the hot night. The dead breath of the wind lulled him. He slept.

When the moon rose, the jingle of harness conveniently roused him again, and sitting up, he beheld the twenty men he had hired, who had gathered at the foot of the cliff.

Carem rose and poured onto the stone of the tomb some wine and oil.

"What are you doing?" demanded one of the men below among the cameloids.

"Making the first offering," said Carem. "Come up now, as I will direct you."

Up they came. A mixed bag they were. Some aristocratic and anxious, others pure fresh scum. They crowded around him, and Carem pointed to the hole.

"The rope I have readied. Who will be first down into the tomb?"

No one thrilled at the chance.

Carem said, "This gold piece, to the first."

After this there were some offers.

Presently three men climbed down, one after the other.

"What do you see?"

"Darkness."

"Yes, that's as it should be."

Then Carem went down and the others followed him.

In the tomb, Carem struck a light, and lit a torch.

It was very hot, as Carem was well used to, but no bats laired there. Nothing lived in that enclosure. Not even a spider or a beetle. Bones there were, however, on the floor.

The walls were brown, and painted dimly by a massive figure that had the head of a long-nosed black dog. At this the crew pointed uneasily.

Carem drew from his clothes a small dark bottle. He spilled out its contents on the stone floor. Fluid ran, and formed a pattern. It was a map, in liquid, of the tomb.

Just at that moment came a low soft growl.  
The hired men, most of them, bleated with alarm.  
But, "It's only magic," said one.

"Exactly so," said Carem. "You are meant to fear it and run away empty-handed. Think of the treasures that lie in the inner chambers."

The men were somewhat consoled. They rubbed their amulets and muttered.

"Do you see that door," said Carem, consulting his liquid map, "who will go through first?"

There was great rivalry as to who would not.  
While they argued something came rushing.

It was like a wind, or five hundred hounds, packed close as fish in a shoal, running after game.

The man nearest the door was one minute there, and then his head was off. It was wrenched from his shoulders. Next the fellow beside him was disemboweled, and another split from throat to crotch. All this was done by an agency invisible.

With quick screams, and sometimes so swift there was no time for that either, the twenty men of Carem's hire landed in pieces and bits on the floor, where the bones of previous victims lay.

But Carem, who had anointed himself with a certain thing repellent to all dogs, was not touched.

When the last man had had his throat torn out, a low satisfied growl rang round the space.

"Thus I make the second offering," said Carem.

Then he walked through the dark door without being molested, and through thirteen passages, right up to the farthest wall. There he kneeled and felt with his hands by the light of his torch.

Soon he made out a round door no higher than a child of three, and no wider than said child lying sideways.

Through that Carem crawled, and so entered the treasure vault.

There was just enough light to behold.

The room was stuffed with gold, and jewels, green and crimson, blue and white. But everything was on a little scale, even the emeralds no larger than a thumbnail, and the golden effigies of dogs and wolves, foxes and jackals, were the size of acorns and peach stones.

Carem filled the bags inside his clothes, his boots, his loin-pouch. He opened the ready purses at his neck and waist. He put things into his mouth, and up his nostrils, and in his ears, and elsewhere, which shall be nameless.

Take as you find.

On the wall of this last room, which was a sort of kennel, was painted no dog, but a black eye. Carem took no obvious notice of it as he screwed a ruby into his navel. Sucking a last golden standing jackal with diamond eyes between his lips, Carem crawled back out of the inner place.

He had accrued a great amount, yet a greater was left. Let that, then, be the third offering, his temperance. For the rest, he would have reputation. That was worth a vaster amount than the stones themselves.

Back through the thirteen passages he waddled. In the outer passage he waddled. In the outer place, he stepped fastidiously over the bones.

He stood a moment listening.

Somewhere something howled, but it was, as usual, on the desert outside.

Carem climbed the rope, awkwardly, and emerged into the boiling air, which was itself like the interior of a grave.

On the table top of the tomb, huge black paw marks were apparent in the moonlight, and overhead the mass of stars seemed to describe, for a moment, the skull of a dog.

Carem pulled up the rope, and spoke a word. The entry to the tomb, the hole, vanished.

Below the cliff most of the cameloids had run off. But a few remained, trembling and farting with fear. He would sell them at a handy village. Well, a shame to waste.

When he got down from the cliff, Carem turned about on the sand, clanking and clinking from his weight of jewels and gold.

There on the smooth ground lay something black, pointing from him and away from the moon. He had kept his shadow. All was well.

On his return home, plain Bisint tactfully sent word that she was out of sorts, and beautiful Zulmia met Carem in the garden, plump as a white plum and garlanded with blue-black hair. Much joy he had of her, under the roses and lemon trees, while bees buzzed and the honeyed sun slowly set into the uncomplicated pink desert of Noom Dargh.

He did not tell Zulmia, or even Bisint, anything of his exploits, nor did he give them anything from his robbery. Instead he brought Zulmia a rope of pearls and sapphires to match her skin and eyes, and Bisint a rope of topaz to match her teeth.

The treasure of the tomb Carem sold carefully and meagerly. Soon nobles and lords sent word to him, and later might come the words of kings. He would be famous now. He would be feared as well as praised.

Zulmia approached her husband modestly. She told him, as if he, not she, had been clever, that she was with child.

"I am sure it's a boy, masterful husband. Only a male would spring from your loins."

Carem was pleased, for never before, to his knowledge, had he reproduced himself.

He looked delightedly at his lovely wife, plumper than ever, her hair like silk, and at her feet her jet black shadow. All was wonderfully well.

How charmingly the days and nights passed then. Even Bisint was helpful, often ailing, and keeping to her rooms. If she should die, all her wealth would come to Carem.

He would think now, upon sunny evenings, watching the final noose of light about the towers of the city below, how he might give up for good his profession. How he might turn to other things, from which none would dare refuse him entry. His son, after all, should inherit a business, not merely an empire of robbery.

On the night of the full moon, eight months later, Bisint peacefully passed away.

In a generous spirit, Carem left her her topazes to be buried in.

It was midday, and beautiful Zulmia had gone into labor. From the arbor where Carem sat drinking pomegranate wine, the house was closely visible, and her screams of pain might now and then be heard. They were good, rounded, healthy screams. It seemed the birth was going perfectly.

Carem saw a woman approaching through his gardens. He took her for a servant bringing roast lamb and date leaves. He smiled and poured a little wine on the ground, an old custom, for the child to be.

Something caught Carem's eye then. It was his fine dark shadow. How bold it was. How black.

Carem studied this. He noticed, oh yes, that some curious arrangement of the awning, or the arbor trees, had caused his shadow to take on a peculiar shape. It had two upright ears. Its nose was very long.

As Carem was pondering this, the servant woman came up to him. She was not his servant, but a squat female, veiled, with the sun shining through her. Around her neck gleamed faintly a rope of yellow stones.

"I am your dead wife," said Bisint's uncomely ghost, unnecessarily. "I have arrived to warn you."

"That was most kind. Of what?"

"Hark."

Carem harkened, and heard another loud scream from the house.

"Yes," said Carem. "That is Zulmia."

"Indeed," said Bisint, "and she does well to scream. O stupid Carem, what did you bring away from the Tomb of the Black Dog?"

It was random to lie to or upbraid a ghost. "Some trinkets," he replied.

"What else, O stupid Carem?"

"Nothing."

"Yes."

"Only I, myself."

"Stupid, stupid Carem," emphasized Bisint, and disappeared.

Carem looked down for his shadow, that had pointed ears and a snout. It too had vanished.

A particularly awful scream rocked through the air.

Carem glanced at his mansion.

Zulmia's windows, which were hung with crystal clear cloth, turned suddenly violently red. More, they appeared wet.

Then came other screams, the shrieks of women and the bawling of men.

A noted physician sprang suddenly out of the window. He fell down among the lemon trees.

Carem rose and went toward him.

"What, pray, goes on?"

"Your wife is delivered," said the physician. He had broken both his legs, but paid them no heed. His robe, like the window hangings, was soaked by blood.

"A boy or a girl?" asked Carem.

"Neither. I will tell you," said the physician, "since I cannot run away. Something tore itself from the womb of your wife, up out of her belly. It burst her like an orange. It was dark. It had a pointed snout."

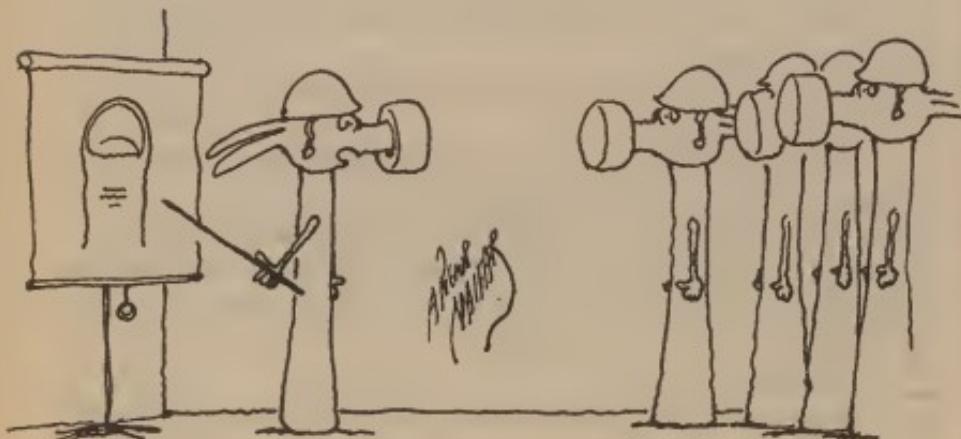
Carem turned from the physician and gazed at the doorway of his house.

From the golden inner walk, something black was coming. It was tall and lean and moved lightly on its hind limbs.

Nothing had he brought from the Tomb of the Black Dog, save his loot and his body, with every aperture blocked. But one. One too small indeed to fill. And the shadow had gone with him. The shadow had run out of him, there among the roses.

From Carem's doorway stepped Anubar, Biter of Souls. He was black as night, in the mid of day. His ears stood up, His snout was long. In His clawed paws lay the remains of Zulmia's womb and round His feet, like bracelets were wrapped the entrails of others. He ripped the physician's body in half, in passing. Then stared at Carem, who bowed low and waited for death.

As well he might. 



*"Take a good look at the enemy, gentlemen."*

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In addition to writing columns for us, Charles de Lint writes excellent fiction. Tor has just published *The Ivory and the Horn*, a collection of his Newford short stories. Charles is also Writer in Residence at the Ottawa and Gloucester Public Libraries.

Every holiday season, Charles de Lint sends a short story in a chapbook to his friends. Some of those stories have been reprinted in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror. Others have appeared here or in *Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine*. "Coyote Stories" was Charles's gift to his friends in the winter of 1993-1994. We're happy to share the story with you.

# Coyote Stories

By Charles de Lint

*Four directions blow the sacred winds  
We are standing at the center  
Every morning wakes another chance  
To make our lives a little better*

— Kiya Heartwood,  
from "Wishing Well"

THIS DAY COYOTE IS FEELING pretty thirsty, so he goes into Joey's Bar, you know, on the corner of Palm and Grasso, across from the Men's Mission, and he lays a nugget of gold down on the counter, but Joey he won't serve him.

"So you don't serve skins no more?" Coyote he asks him.

"Last time you gave me gold, it turned to shit on me," is what Joey says. He points to the Rolex on Coyote's wrist. "But I'll take that. Give you change and everything."

Coyote scratches his muzzle and pretends he has to think about it. "Cost me twenty-five dollars," he says. "It looks better than the real thing."

"I'll give you fifteen, cash, and a beer."

"How about a bottle of whiskey?"

So Coyote comes out of Joey's Bar and he's missing his Rolex now, but he's got a bottle of Jack in his hand and that's when he sees Albert, just around the corner, sitting on the ground with his back against the brick wall and his legs stuck out across the sidewalk so you have to step over them, you want to get by.

"Hey, Albert," Coyote says. "What's your problem?"

"Joey won't serve me no more."

"That because you're indigenous?"

"Naw. I got no money."

So Coyote offers him some of his whiskey. "Have yourself a swallow," he says, feeling generous, because he only paid two dollars for the Rolex and it never worked anyway.

"Thanks, but I don't think so," is what Albert tells him. "Seems to me I've been given a sign. Got no money means I should stop drinking."

Coyote shakes his head and takes a sip of his Jack. "You are one crazy skin," he says.

That Coyote he likes his whiskey. It goes down smooth and puts a gleam in his eye. Maybe, he drinks enough, he'll remember some good time and smile, maybe he'll get mean and pick himself a fight with a lamp post like he's done before. But one thing he knows, whether he's got money or not's got nothing to do with omens. Not for him, anyway.

But a lack of money isn't really an omen for Albert either; it's a way of life. Albert, he's like the rest of us skins. Left the reserve, and we don't know why. Come to the city, and we don't know why. Still alive, and we don't know why. But Albert, he remembers it being different. He used to listen to his grandmother's stories, soaked them up like the dirt will rain, thirsty after a long drought. And he tells stories himself, too, or pieces of stories, talk to you all night long if you want to listen to him.

It's always Coyote in Albert's stories, doesn't matter if he's making them up or just passing along gossip. Sometimes Coyote's himself, sometimes he's Albert, sometimes he's somebody else. Like it wasn't Coyote sold his Rolex and ran into him outside Joey's Bar that day, it was Billy Yazhie. Maybe ten years ago now, Billy he's standing under a turquoise sky beside Spider Rock

one day, looking up, looking up for a long time, before he turns away and walks to the nearest highway, sticks out his thumb and he doesn't look back till it's too late. Wakes up one morning and everything he knew is gone and he can't find his way back.

Oh that Billy he's a dark skin, he's like leather. You shake his hand and it's like you took hold of a cowboy boot. He knows some of the old songs and he's got himself a good voice, strong, ask anyone. He used to drum for the dancers back home, but his hands shake too much now, he says. He doesn't sing much anymore, either. He's got to be like the rest of us, hanging out in Fitzhenry Park, walking the streets, sleeping in an alleyway because the Men's Mission it's out of beds. We've got the stoic faces down real good, but you look in our eyes, maybe catch us off guard, you'll see we don't forget anything. It's just most times we don't want to remember.

This Coyote he's not too smart sometimes. One day he gets into a fight with a biker, says he going to count coup like his plains brothers, knock that biker all over the street, only the biker's got himself a big hickory-handled hunting knife and he cuts Coyote's head right off. Puts a quick end to that fight, I'll tell you. Coyote he spends the rest of the afternoon running around, trying to find somebody to sew his head back on again.

"That Coyote," Jimmy Coldwater says, "he's always losing his head over one thing or another."

I tell you we laughed.

But Albert he takes that omen seriously. You see him drinking still, but he's drinking coffee now, black as a raven's wing, or some kind of tea he brews for himself in a tin can, makes it from weeds he picks in the empty lots and dries in the sun. He's living in an abandoned factory these days, and he's got this one wall, he's gluing feathers and bones to it, nothing fancy, no eagles' wings, no bear's jaw, wolf skull, just what he can find lying around, pigeon feathers and crows', rat bones, bird bones, a necklace of mouse skulls strung on a wire. Twigs and bundles of weeds, rattles he makes from tin cans and bottles and jars. He paints figures on the wall, in between all the junk. Thunderbird. Bear. Turtle. Raven.

Everybody's starting to agree, that Albert he's one crazy skin.

Now when he's got money, he buys food with it and shares it out.

Sometimes he walks over to Palm Street where the skin girls are working the trade and he gives them money, asks them to take a night off. Sometimes they take the money and just laugh, getting into the next car that pulls up. But sometimes they take the money and they sit in a coffee shop, sit there by the window, drinking their coffee and look out at where they don't have to be for one night.

And he never stops telling stories.

"That's what we are," he tells me one time. Albert he's smiling, his lips are smiling, his eyes are smiling, but I know he's not joking when he tells me that. "Just stories. You and me, everybody, we're a set of stories, and what those stories are is what makes us what we are. Same thing for whites as skins. Same thing for a tribe and a city and a nation and the world. It's all these stories and how they braid together that tells us who and what and where we are.

"We got to stop forgetting and get back to remembering. We got to stop asking for things, stop waiting for people to give us the things we think we need. All we really need is the stories. We have the stories and they'll give us the one thing nobody else can, the thing we can only take for ourselves, because there's nobody can give you back your pride. You've got to take it back yourself.

"You lose your pride and you lose everything. We don't want to know the stories, because we don't want to remember. But we've got to take the good with the bad and make ourselves whole again, be proud again. A proud people can never be defeated. They lose battles, but they'll never lose the war, because for them to lose the war you've got to go out and kill each and every one of them, everybody with even a drop of the blood. And even then, the stories will go on. There just won't be any skins left to hear them."

This Coyote he's always getting in trouble. One day he's sitting at a park bench, reading a newspaper, and this cop starts to talk big to one of the skin girls, starts talking mean, starts pushing her around. Coyote's feeling chivalrous that day, like he's in a white man's movie, and he gets into a fight with the cop. He gets beat up bad and then more cops come and they take him away, put him in jail.

The judge he turns Coyote into a mouse for a year so that there's Coyote, got that same lopsided grin, got that sharp muzzle and those long ears and the

big bushy tail, but he's so small now you can hold him in the palm of your hand.

"Doesn't matter how small you make me," Coyote he says to the judge.  
"I'm still Coyote."

Albert he's so serious now. He gets out of jail and he goes back to living in the factory. Kids've torn down that wall of his, so he gets back to fixing it right, gets back to sharing food and brewing tea and helping the skin girls out when he can, gets back to telling stories. Some people they start thinking of him as a shaman and call him by an old Kickaha name.

Dan Whiteduck he translates the name for Billy Yazhie, but Billy he's not quite sure what he's heard. Know-more-truth, or No-more-truth?

"You spell that with a 'K' or what?" Billy he asks Albert.

"You take your pick how you want to spell it," Albert he says.

Billy he learns how to pronounce that old name and that's what he uses when he's talking about Albert. Lots of people do. But most of us we just keep on calling him Albert.

**O**NE DAY this Coyote decides he wants to have a pow-wow, so he clears the trash from this empty lot, makes the circle, makes the fire. The people come but no one knows the songs anymore, no one knows the drumming that the dancers need, no one knows the steps. Everybody they're just standing around, looking at each other, feeling sort of stupid, until Coyote he starts singing, *Ya-ha-hey, ya-ha-hey*, and he's stomping around the circle, kicking up dirt and dust.

People they start to laugh, then, seeing Coyote playing the fool.

"You are one crazy skin!" Angie Crow calls to him and people laugh some more, nodding in agreement, pointing at Coyote as he dances round and round the circle.

But Jimmy Coldwater he picks up a stick and he walks over to the drum Coyote made. It's this big metal tub, salvaged from a junkyard, that Coyote's covered with a skin and who knows where he got that skin, nobody's asking. Jimmy he hits the skin of the drum and everybody they stop laughing and look at him, so Jimmy he hits the skin again. Pretty soon he's got the rhythm to Coyote's dance and then Dan Whiteduck he picks up a stick, too, and joins Jimmy at the drum.

Billy Yazhie he starts up to singing then, takes Coyote's song and turns it around so that he's singing about Spider Rock and turquoise skies, except everybody hears it their own way, hears the stories they want to hear in it. There's more people drumming and there's people dancing and before anyone knows it, the night's over and there's the dawn poking over the roof of an abandoned factory, thinking, these are some crazy skins. People they're lying around and sitting around, eating the flatbread and drinking the tea that Coyote provided, and they're all tired, but there's something in their hearts that feels very full.

"This was one fine powwow," Coyote he says.

Angie she nods her head. She's sitting beside Coyote all sweaty and hot and she'd never looked quite so good before.

"Yeah," she says. "We got to do it again."

We start having regular powwows after that night, once, sometimes twice a month. Some of the skins they start to making dancing outfits, going back up to the reserve for visits and asking about steps and songs from the old folks. Gets to be we feel like a community, a small skin nation living here in exile with the ruins of broken-down tenements and abandoned buildings all around us. Gets to be we start remembering some of our stories and sharing them with each other instead of sharing bottles. Gets to be we have something to feel proud about.

Some of us we find jobs. Some of us we try to climb up the side of the wagon but we keep falling off. Some of us we go back to homes we can hardly remember. Some of us we come from homes where we can't live, can't even breathe, and drift here and there until we join this tribe that Albert he helped us find.

And even if Albert he's not here anymore, the stories go on. They have to go on, I know that much. I tell them every chance I get.

See, this Coyote he got in trouble again, this Coyote he's always getting in trouble, you know that by now, same as me. And when he's in jail this time he sees that it's all tribes inside, the same as it is outside. White tribes, black tribes, yellow tribes, skin tribes. He finally understands, finally realizes that maybe there can't ever be just one tribe, but that doesn't mean we should stop trying.

But even in jail this Coyote he can't stay out of trouble and one day he gets into another fight and he gets cut again, but this time he thinks maybe he's going to die.

"Albert," Coyote he says, "I am one crazy skin. I am never going to learn, am I?"

"Maybe not this time," Albert says, and he's holding Coyote's head and he's wiping the dribble of blood that comes out of the side of Coyote's mouth and is trickling down his chin. "But that's why you're Coyote. The wheel goes round and you'll get another chance."

Coyote he's trying to be brave, but he's feeling weaker and it hurts, it hurts, this wound in his chest that cuts to the bone, that cuts the thread that binds him to this story.

"There's a thing I have to remember," Coyote he says, "but I can't find it. I can't find its story...."

"Doesn't matter how small they try to make you," Albert he reminds Coyote. "You're still Coyote."

"Ya-ha-hey," Coyote he says. "Now I remember."

Then Coyote he grins and he lets the pain take him away into another story.

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# FILMS

## KATHI MAIO

### A FLOP ABOUT A FAILURE

**T**IM BURTON has pulled in some impressive numbers at the box office during his still young career as a film director. Not all of his films have equalled the megahit status of his *Batman* flicks, but he hasn't had any real bombs. Until now. As I write this, it is apparent that Burton's affectionate biographical flick, *Ed Wood*, although still playing at a few art houses, is going to do very, very poorly.

It makes me sorry. Like many other critics, I found the film to be entertaining and beautifully made, with several excellent performances (notably, the much-lauded supporting performance of Martin Landau as Bela Lugosi). Still, there is something oddly appropriate about *Ed Wood* becoming one of the biggest high-profile flops of the year, since the title character of the film is a film director who, himself, is famous for failure.

Edward Wood, Jr. is repeatedly cited as "the world's worst film director." Such a label constitutes a claim to fame of sorts, hence the biopic. But I have personally never believed it to be true. First of all, the world is a big place. But even if you assume the worst films of this planet come from the U.S., Mr. Wood's strange little B-movies can't even come close to being the worst, because, in their own inept and bizarre way, they come from the heart.

Films that are produced out of arrogance, springing from an out-of-control "artistic" ego (Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* is the most infamous example of this), are much worse than anything Ed Wood ever created. So, too, are the cynical films that palm off poor writing and direction, not because the filmmakers don't know any better, but because they assume that their audience doesn't know any better.

To my mind, a film like *Demolition Man* (1993) makes Ed Wood's

trashy movies look mighty good. For that Sly Stallone vehicle had a sizeable budget and real star actors. Producer Joel Silver and friends, Director Marco Brambilla, and screenwriters Daniel Waters, et al., had great resources to draw upon, and they still created a film that was loud and stupid and, within a half hour, extremely tedious.

*Demolition Man* exhibited little respect for itself. None for its viewers. Mr. Silver and his dream team assumed that their audience wouldn't know a good movie if it jumped off the screen and karate-chopped them upside their head. They were wrong. In relation to the costs of making it, *Demolition Man* was a major box office disappointment.

Mr. Wood, who never had the security or assets of a major studio behind him, created his movies on a (broken) shoestring, with amateurish actors fumbling around on ramshackle sets. But you don't become a cult favorite for nothing. There is something fascinating about Ed Wood's strange little movies, because they are ridiculously inventive and flamboyantly bad.

Not all of his early films—those of his "prime," made before failure sent him deeper into the bottle and a pathetic existence in pornography—were directed by Wood. But they are

all his. They are all botched, bungling exercises in cinema. Yet they still retain the power to entertain.

His girl juvie flick, *The Violent Years* (1956), for example, was directed by someone else, namely William M. Morgan. Mr. Morgan's direction is no better (or worse) than Mr. Wood's. But it is Wood's inventively sleazy writing that you remember. His heroine, Paula, is so sad and angry at the neglect of her well-to-do parents that she leads a girl gang in her spare time—and she has way too much spare time.

Paula's gang not only does the standard j.d. stuff (robbing gas stations and having shoot-outs with the police), they also indulge in kinkier activity. One evening, Paula is so bored that she attacks a couple at lovers' lane and orders the smooching girl to strip off her sweater—Mr. Wood had a thing for women's sweaters, after all—and then takes the necking lad further into the woods and has her way with him.

*The Violent Years* is absurd, but not boring. And the same is true of the films Mr. Wood is most famous for, all of which might be considered science fiction/fantasy/horror. The fact is that Wood couldn't help himself from straying into the fantastical, whether it was appropriate to his story or not.

Wood's autobiographical film, *Glen or Glenda* (1953), which exploitation producer George Weiss thought was going to be a rip-off of Christine Jorgenson and transsexualism, turned out to be Wood's very personal plea for tolerance about male transvestism. It's a pseudo-clinical docudrama, but at the same time it's — believe it or not — a fantasy film.

Wood wanted to give work to his friend and hero, Bela Lugosi. But he knew enough not to try to put his hero in silk sheath and high heels. And so, from an easy chair, Lugosi plays "the Spirit," a puppet-master who meddles in the lives of humans. While Wood himself acts out the main plot as a confused cross-dressing hero, Lugosi appears from time to time, muttering about "the big green dragon that sits on your doorstep" who "eats little boys, puppy dog tails and big fat snails."

It's as kooky a film as you're likely to ever see. Dependent, by necessity, upon stock footage, Wood used it to surreal advantage. In one of Ed's most memorable screen moments, we watch Bela's tired, fanatical face exclaim "Pull the String!" while a stock clip of a buffalo stampede fills the bottom of the screen. It's an image you might shake your head over, but you probably won't nod off while you watch it. (The

same cannot be said for the likes of *Demolition Man*.)

And that's the way it is with all of Ed Wood's flabbergasting films. In *Bride of the Monster* (1955), Bela played a mad scientist — is there any other kind? — Dr. Eric Vomoff, who wanted to make a "race of atomic supermen" to cheer his lonely exile, but ended up with a pile of corpses instead. He's not, it seems, a very skilled mad scientist!

*Bride* also starred the massive Tor Johnson as Lobo, Bela's zombie servant (and his one semi-successful zapee), who would bring home to his master any hapless soul who wandered near Vomoff's house. That is, unless a deep-sea octopus (stock footage alert!) that does a man-eating impersonation of an alligator in a near-by inland swamp, doesn't get to them first.

It's a strange tale, ineptly performed. *Bride of the Monster* has a clearer narrative structure than most of Wood's films, but that isn't exactly a selling point with Ed Wood's fans. That is why most Wood aficionados consider his magnum opus to be an intergalactic graverobber movie called *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

As befits a counter-classic of the first order, there is considerable lore concerning the making of *Plan 9* — much of which is detailed in Burton's biopic and earlier in Rudolph Grey's

fascinating (if suitably self-contradictory) oral biography of Wood, *Nightmare of Ecstasy*.

There are the stories about what an independent filmmaker sometimes has to do to get funding. (Forget about a "casting couch," what if you had to dunk yourself in a baptism pool!) And there are the tales about the challenge of completing a film even when the star dies before you begin principal photography. (Ed's solution: To use the few meaningless shots he had of Bela Lugosi entering and exiting his little bungalow, etc., then convince his wife's chiropractor to play the actual part of the monstrous recently risen with a cape pulled up over most of his face through the entire movie.... As if that could hide the fact that Dr. Tom Mason was younger, slimmer, and a head taller than poor old Bela!)

How could you not love a movie with stories like that behind it? We are talking about a film that opens with the Amazing Criswell ponderously predicting that "future events such as these will affect you in the future." As the film continues, we watch, dumbfounded, as aliens — all of whom look like waiters from a Hungarian restaurant — attempt to take over the earth, starting with the dead. (Good plan.)

And the dearly departed are such

intriguing body types! There is Wood's fave, giant Tor, in another zombie part — this time as a dead cop. There is the ooky, cinch-waisted, black-clad Vampira as Bela's dead wife. And then there is Dr. Tom, impersonating the great horror star, Lugosi.

The risen dead plod around silently, almost aimlessly. But Tor, Vampira, and Dr. Tom can comfort themselves with the fact that their performances are much stronger than any of the people who are forced to utter Mr. Wood's dialogue.

Yes, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* is bad. Really bad. But, as such, it is the epitome of the Z-grade science fiction and horror films most of us watched when we were younger. Don't such films deserve to be preserved and re-watched? I think so. They're a sentimental treasure, as well as an absolute hoot. And that is why the tape and laser disk re-release of Mr. Wood's works, spurred by the theatrical release of *Ed Wood*, is such a blessing.

And what of *Ed Wood*, the movie? It is some of Mr. Burton's best work. Clearly, he could relate to a filmmaker who made singular horror/fantasy films, and who idolized (and eventually employed) a great horror actor from an earlier day. Burton's own fascination with

Vincent Price — as evidenced in his earliest film, a short called *Vincent*, his loving use of Mr. Price in the film *Edward Scissorhands*, and the, as yet unreleased, interview-documentary Burton has done on Vincent Price's life and career — make for an obvious parallel.

And it wasn't one lost on *Ed Wood*'s writers, Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski. Although the two screenwriters were originally interested in convincing director Michael Lehmann to make a film about Wood. (The idea that a biopic about the world's worst director would be written by the men who penned the *Problem Child* movies, and directed by the man who made *Hudson Hawk*, appealed to them.) But when Tim Burton said he wanted to make the film, the two jumped at the chance. And wrote their screenplay with an emphasis on the relationship of Wood and Lugosi, specifically to resonate with the director's own experiences.

The resulting script is, indeed, an endearing love story between a man and his mentor. And its detailing of Ed's directorial denial, his penchant for cross-dressing, and his demi-monde of ghoulish eccentrics and radically untalented showbiz wannabes, certainly makes for a story you haven't seen fifty times before. *Ed Wood* is both funny-ha-ha and

funny-peuliar, and is sumptuously shot in glorious black and white.

Johnny Depp is marvelous as the awful auteur. My only complaint is that the writers didn't allow him to express any of the self-doubt and desperation Mr. Wood must have felt (when he wasn't publicly putting the most positive spin on his dubious film career). Depp has said that Burton used to whisper "Andy Hardy" into his ear, between takes. And his performance certainly captures that "Come on, kids! Let's put on a show!" enthusiasm for moviemaking.

*Ed Wood*'s supporting cast, which includes Sarah Jessica Parker, Patricia Arquette, Jeffrey Jones, and Bill Murray, is also excellent. And, as I indicated earlier, Mr. Landau's performance as the frail, dignified actor (and morphine addict), Bela Lugosi, is a wonder.

So why did *Ed Wood* do so badly? I have ruminated upon that question for a while.

First off, most moviegoers don't like movies about making movies. Hollywood keeps making them because filmmakers are a self-obsessed lot, fascinated with their own lives. Audiences feel differently.

Moreover, too much was made of how BAD Mr. Wood's movies are. Those who haven't seen *Plan 9* — and who have never realized that

there are rotten pictures, and then there are Rotten Pictures—probably never understood what all the fuss was about. Why make a movie about a man who failed? Why, it's positively un-American to celebrate anyone but the best and the brightest!

Many potential viewers probably heard that the film was about a male cross-dresser who wasn't the kind of raging *La Cage Aux Folles* queen they enjoy laughing at. And they were turned off by the idea of a straight guy in an angora sweater. No doubt many were also turned off by the fact that the film is in black and white. (The studios told Burton that no one wanted to see black and white anymore. Sadly, they are probably right.)

And then there is the key question folks at the cineplex ticket booth must

have asked themselves: How can you make a good movie about *bad* movie-making? I don't know how, I only know for a fact that it can be done. The feat was accomplished, a little over a year ago, with Joe Dante's *Matinee* (which also did poorly at the box office). Like Mr. Dante's homage to schlockmeisters like William Castle, Mr. Burton's *Ed Wood* is an excellent movie about the wacky world of lousy science fiction and horror film.

May it find an audience who can appreciate its delights in the video and cable markets. *Ed Wood* deserves to achieve the kind of cult classic status that *Plan 9* now has. And it also warrants recognition as one of the best films of 1994. Box office receipts shouldn't be the only measure of success—or of failure. ☐

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SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

*"The String"* marks Kathleen Ann Goonan's first appearance in F&SF. Her short fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Amazing Stories, Interzone, and Tomorrow Magazine. Her first novel, Queen City Jazz, came out from Tor last year.

About this story, she writes, "The only correlation in this story to real life is that about ten years ago my own father retrieved a tangled kite string from a tree and set to work, following the rules in the story. And who knows what might have happened, had not an overzealous hotel housekeeper disposed of it by mistake."

# The String

*By Kathleen Ann Goonan*

DAN TRIED TO IGNORE THE sadness which pervaded him whenever he and Jessica did something fun together. He smiled at her and her smile said, "Don't worry, Dad, it's all right."

She was much more grown-up than he. But that's what a fatal illness often did to a child, the doctors told him.

Cincinnati was always cool in spring, and often overcast. Dan squinted at the sky as he unrolled the brilliant dragon kite Jessica had picked out and snared its breast with a string.

"Come on, Dad," she said, hopping from one foot to another. "What's taking you so long?"

"I'm kind of concerned about those trees," he said. Huge oaks surrounded the ball field across the street from their house, but it was the clearest place around. The gusting wind held the sweet tang of rejuvenation. How many springs would his daughter see? He had to try to knot the string twice; his hand trembled the first time and he missed poking it through.

Jessica was short for her age, eight, and she wheezed a lot. Dan knew she would be dead in a few years but tried not to think about it too much. He wouldn't live forever either. Anita was bitter about their daughter having cystic fibrosis, and seemed to want to blame it all on Dan, even though she knew that it took recessive genes from both parents.

Jessica lifted the kite, and its fanciful wings filled with wind. "It's gorgeous," she said. "Purple, red, and yellow."

He smiled at her, and she grinned back, her pale brown hair flying out from the hat pulled over her ears, her green eyes full of knowledge no child should have to bear, learned as she lay gasping for breath in an endless stream of anonymous hospital beds, stuck full of needles which dripped experimental drugs which never worked into her veins, which were getting harder and harder to find.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he asked.

He watched the string run through her hands as the wind took the kite. She played it out until the dragon floated high and small, then began to play with it, making it swoop, its long tail swirling like invisible writing on the gray sky.

Then she shrieked as a strong gust pulled the end of the string, which Dan had wrapped around a stick, from her hand. The dragon hung suspended for a moment, then zigzagged and plummeted into an oak tree.

"Oh no," said Jessica, looking stunned.

"It's okay," he said. He climbed the tree, cut the string with his penknife, pulled the kite from the branches, and tossed it down to the ground. It was a little ripped up, but he thought he could fix it.

When he was almost down, he saw the tangled string, stuck in a lower branch. He reached over, worked it loose, and stuck it in his pocket. Then, holding hands, he and Jessica walked back to the old house he'd lived in since he was a child.

Later that night, when he finished putting the dishes away and Jessica was in bed, he remembered the string, and got it out of his pocket. Anita, on one side of the huge kitchen which served as sort of a living room too, was entrenched in her CAD, working on some specs she'd brought home. She was so good her firm had paid to have the computer-assisted design setup here at home as well as at the office.

She looked up. "What's that?" she asked.

"Just the kite string."

"Well, we don't need any more clutter around here. Throw it away."

Instead, Dan sat down at the table and studied it. "Look," he said, "it's not really a knot."

"You couldn't get much more knotted than that," Anita said.

"No, look: one end stayed attached to the stick. One end stayed attached to the kite. It's not a knot. The ends never crossed. Theoretically, it's just a perfectly straight string."

"Right," said Anita. "Sure. That's exactly what it looks like to me. Well, I've got to get to bed. I guess it's my turn to take Jessica to physical therapy tomorrow," she said, with that familiar resentful edge to her voice.

"I would, but I've got a meeting in the afternoon." He was a structural engineer. He was aware that Anita, a brilliant, moody architect, sometimes found his methodical, dogged approach to life dull. He often wished he were more spontaneous, but he couldn't help himself. He had long since resigned himself to being in the background and assisting her rapidly advancing career in any way he could.

Dan sat at the table for half an hour, studying the string. Finally, he got two knives out of the drawer and tied one end to each knife.

Then he started to pull little loops from the tight core.

Each loosening opened other possible avenues of unraveling, and he stared into the heart of the string, more and more fascinated. Each time he created some slack, he followed it down to the core, pulling and teasing, until it was lost in the nest of tightness. Each time, he felt a little ping of joy when the core of the string became more and more revealed.

It was three a.m. before he stopped, surprised at the time. How could he have become so absorbed? He was about to untie the string from the knives and throw it away when he stopped, smiled, and chucked the whole thing in a drawer. At least it was something to do.

He went to bed feeling better than he had in a long time.

When he got home from work that night Jessica ran to meet him and said, "Guess what? My lung capacity increased."

"Is that true?" Dan asked Anita, who was peeling carrots.

She didn't turn, but stopped what she was doing as she spoke. "That's

what they said," she replied, in the terribly even voice she used whenever they discussed Jessica's medical problems. Then she went back to scraping carrots.

"That's wonderful, pumpkin," Dan said, and picked Jessica up, tossed her in the air. They'd learned to celebrate about anything, but this was something extraordinary.

"Yeah," she said, laughing. She went over and opened the silverware drawer so she could set the table. "What's *this*?" she said, and pulled out the wad of string dangling from one of the knives. "Is this the kite string?"

"Oh, Dan, I thought I told you to throw that away," said Anita.

Dan grabbed it, feeling unaccountably protective. "It's fun," he said. "You'd have to pay a lot of money for a puzzle as good as this." He put it up on a shelf. "Here, I'll help you set the table," he said.

After dinner, when everything was put away, Anita flipped on her CAD again. Her work was never done. Jessica started her homework, and Dan got his string down off the shelf and started to play with it.

It was wound quite tightly. He needed something to slide underneath the strands and pull them. Absently, he got up, rummaged in the drawer, and got two oyster forks. Hooking one through the central morass, he used the other to work a loop loose.

As he concentrated, he found himself thinking not about the string, but about Jessica. He tried to push back the relief and happiness he felt about the lung capacity — after all, within the progress of the disease, it only meant a temporary surcease — but joy nonetheless that Jessica might have a time of easier breathing, however short, flooded him. Despite himself, he imagined her running, playing, like other children, unburdened by her constant unnatural prescience of her own mortality. She was in the baseball field, up to bat, her little rear end stuck out as she leaned forward from the waist, grasping the bat. Her hair streamed back from her face. "Put 'er here," she yelled at the pitcher.

"What are you *doing*, Dan?" asked Anita, as her shadow fell across the table.

"Well," he said, startled back into the present, "these are the rules. Since the ends didn't cross when this was made, the rule is that I have to straighten it out without pulling the ends through. They always have to stay on the outside."

"Good lord," she said. "Well, it's after midnight." He looked up and saw she had her nightgown on. "I've been in bed for an hour. You know you don't feel good if you don't get enough sleep, and I don't know when you got to bed last night."

"You're right," he said, and put the string up on the shelf and went to bed. But the image of Jessica rounding the bases persisted into his dreams.

**T**HREE WEEKS later, he had still not solved the string. He worked on it nightly, much to Anita's disgust. "It's getting dirty," she said.

One Tuesday evening, Dan looked up at a knock on the screen door. "Frank," he said. "Come on in."

Frank Jones, a widower from down the street, did, and the door slammed shut behind him. Crickets were gaining in volume and the smell of new-cut grass wafted into the kitchen. Frank, a tall thin man with a good head of snow-white hair, though he was almost seventy, put his hands on his hips and frowned. "What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"Behaving like a crazy man, that's what," said Anita from her terminal.

"Dad's untying the string," said Jessica as she rushed through the kitchen.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Dan.

"I'm just going out to play hide-and-seek with the kids."

"You've got exactly fifteen minutes."

"Oh, Dad!"

"I mean it." Dan was secretly pleased. It had been years since she'd felt well enough to keep going for so long, and now she'd be out with the neighborhood kids well after dark each night if he didn't put his foot down.

"Oh, all right," she grumbled, and rushed out the door.

"Get a beer, Frank, and sit down," said Dan, not lifting his gaze from his puzzle.

"Don't mind if I do." The old man opened the refrigerator, chose a beer, and pulled up a chair made of aluminum tubing. The seat and back were covered with marbleized dark green oilcloth.

"So what's up?"

Frank's bottle of Rolling Rock hissed as he opened it. "Ahh, nothing much. I wish the kids lived closer, I guess. You know, I got good days and bad days, just like always."

It had been three years since his wife had died suddenly of a stroke, and Frank came in regularly to complain about the loneliness of his life, which Dan knew was quite real.

He remembered Mrs. Jones as he bent over the string, listening to Frank's laments. She had been a bustling, happy woman of the starched laundry school. She raised two boys while Frank put in his thirty years at the mattress factory, all the while tending to her massive garden and baking like a master chef.

He also remembered, quite vividly, the Joneses on their evening walk, hand in hand, strolling down the oak-lined street daily for as long as he could remember. He remembered Frank teaching him how to pitch a softball across the street at the park, because his father, though an affable sort, maintained an unfashionable dislike for the sport of the day. Frank's kind face had been younger then, and Dan unaccountably recalled that his eyes had beamed with happiness when, one day, he had looked right into Dan's and said, "You know, this is a lot of fun." Dan had realized, even though he was only ten, that "this" didn't just mean teaching him how to fake out the batter, but was a deep and basic satisfaction and appreciation of life itself.

Dan glanced up at Frank now. He was staring out the window, and his face looked blank and old. Dan didn't know why it had to be that way, why life had to wash through him like a wave and recede. The old man seemed like a discarded pot or piece of furniture, and it pained him.

He got up and went to the door. "Jessica!" he shouted. "It's been half an hour. Get in here *right now!*"

Jessica came pounding up the steps. Her cheeks were flushed in the porch light, and she dashed in under his arm and rushed upstairs before he could say a word.

"Kids," said Frank, but his face looked just as old and dead.

Later that night, after Anita had gone to bed — she seemed resigned now to his odd obsession — Frank slipped into Dan's mind again. He saw the old man happy and useful again, face bright, as he'd been right up to the day of Stella's death. Dan was suspended in the feeling of one man's deep contentment with the way things were, and felt enriched by that sharing. He knew now how rare such a feeling was.

It was only two evenings later that Frank came back. His step on the porch was so light Dan didn't recognize it, and his face was so altered that for a moment, looking up from his string, Dan was taken back ten years.

"Come in," said Dan. "You look great."

Frank got his beer and sprawled in a chair, long legs extended, and smiled. "You know," he said, "after the other night I got to thinking about how often I come by and whine, and decided to get up off my butt and do something for myself. Went over to the day care on Fifth Street and they took me on as a volunteer. I'm telling you, Dan, am I ever glad to get out of that house every day. Didn't realize how gloomy it was with the curtains always pulled. Those kids are so cute."

His face was the face Dan had imagined. In fact, his breathing stopped for a second as he realized that he'd pictured Frank sitting here just like this, although he'd imagined that the source of his happiness was instead a new girlfriend.

"I bet they are," said Dan.

The clicking of computer keys in the corner stopped and Anita said, "I wish *Dan* would do something besides work on that ridiculous string. *He* needs to get out and do something else."

"Like what, Anita?" asked Dan, wondering at the fear he felt about being separated from his string.

"Like a movie now and then, that's what. Or just going out for dinner. We haven't done anything in the evening except sit here like two lumps, and I'm getting tired of it!"

"You should have said something," said Dan, pushing the string away. He was very pleasantly surprised, even if Anita was just reacting jealously to his attention to the string. "I think we can just make the eight o'clock movie if we hurry."

"Who's going to watch Jessica?"

"I will," said Frank. He often baby-sat, but not usually on such short notice.

"Are you sure?" asked Dan.

"Of course he's sure," said Anita, getting up in a hurry. "Now, where are my keys?"

While he was at the movie, all Dan could think about was what his next move would be in the unraveling of the string. He even dreamed of the string now, and had it memorized, as if it were a chess game he could project. Yet, whenever he loosened one segment, deeper and more complex tanglings became apparent. Each time, instead of being frustrated, he eagerly delved into the new mystery.

Dan was startled by a loud explosion. Several characters had just been blown up, and the screen was filled with gore.

He found that for some odd reason he had to fight back tears. How could it be possible for humans to watch so many deaths, even acted-out deaths, and not be moved? As he watched, he thought of the war that was in the news lately, in Nepal, as China and India battled it out with the Nepalese Nationalists for control of the poor, mountainous country. The face of a dead villager that he'd seen on the cover of *Time* replaced what was happening in the movie. These wars would go on and on, and humanity for the most part was as unmoved as those in the theater with him, and the victims would slide into the vast unnamed history which held all the countless humans who had been killed by other humans.

He found Anita's hand, and it was cold and unmoving. "Dan," she whispered, "Not so tight. You're hurting me."

He let go, closed his eyes, and tried to unravel the string from memory. As he did, something white-hot began to burn inside him, anger with all the murders, all the killing, all the pain.

He was still angry when they got home and he took the string down. He knew that Anita was completely disgusted by the way she stomped upstairs, but he couldn't help himself.

Faces filled his vision as he delicately pulled and probed: black and white dead people lined up in Prudential's *The World at War* that his father had watched every Sunday night, leaning against the doorjamb thoughtfully with his lit pipe in hand; faces from the Vietnam war; the peasant faces from a hundred countries around the world, stolid and set, fighting for the right to have a say in their own lives against those who made a profit from them being powerless. He remembered the beauty of the country from a trek he'd made in his student days, and the one healthy village he'd seen among all the poor ones. If only all of them could prosper. He carried the image with him into dreams as he put his head down, just to rest for a minute, and fell asleep at the table.

The next morning, while eating breakfast, he leafed through the paper to the international section. There it was. Three scant inches devoted to the uprising. Jessica rushed into the kitchen. "Hey," she said, "give me that paper!" She opened the cupboard and grabbed a bowl, slammed it onto the table. "I forgot, I need some current events for this morning." She sloshed milk onto her cereal.

"Sit down," said Dan.

"I can't. I'll miss the bus."

"I'll drive you. Here. What about this revolution in Nepal?"

She sidled next to him and glanced at it. "Perfect," she said. "Not too long."

"No," Dan said. "It's definitely not too long." It said nothing about the great privation he knew existed, nothing about the squalor, the lack of medicine, adequate food. It said nothing about the fact that only ten percent of Nepalese men could read, and only two percent of the women. It did not say that the average life expectancy was thirty-six years.

Jessica read it in the car while he drove her to school.

Three days later, Jessica was back at the international page. "Now Miss Granshaw wants a follow-up," she said. "Some of the kids asked her what would happen if they couldn't find anything and she said they'd better. Look, Dad — this sure is lucky."

#### TREATY GRANTS SOVEREIGNTY TO NEW NEPALESE GOVERNMENT.

"It says that India and China have both recognized a new elected government in Nepal," Jessica said. "That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Dan, slowly. "That's very good."

Jessica looked up at him then, and looked at him a long time. "Your voice sounds funny," she said. "Do you have a cold?" Dan followed her glance and saw that his right hand had clenched into a fist, with the string crushed inside. The knuckles were white. "Careful, Dad," she said. "You'll mess up your string."

Dan carefully kept his mind blank that night as he worked the string. There is no connection, he thought. No connection.

He turned at a sound, and saw Jessica in her white nightgown standing in the kitchen door. Her eyes were dark and intense; he saw that she was fully awake.

"You really stay up late, don't you?" she asked. "Do you think you'll ever untangle that string?"

Dan rose and picked her up. She was big, growing so quickly now, and he remembered when she had been a baby and hugged her close, quickly. I hope not, was his first, reflexive thought.

"I don't see why not," he said.

She was almost asleep again by the time he tucked her back into bed. Then he went to bed himself, leaving the string on the table for once.

A

NITA CAME home from work in a bad mood, just as she had for two weeks. "Damn it," she said, as she flung her leather diskette holder onto the kitchen table, "they've had plenty of time to look over that museum proposal. Mine is the best they're going to get."

"I'm sure it is," said Dan. He'd been doing his best to keep her on an even keel. For some reason she felt as if her entire career was riding on this one proposal, and that if it wasn't accepted there would be an inevitable downhill slide into obscurity.

And yet, the thought of her getting this job frightened him. Their marriage seemed in shambles, and he felt as if that would be the last straw, her spending as much time as she would have to on the museum.

"Oh, what do you care?" she snapped. "All you ever do is play with that string."

Dan didn't even protest anymore. He realized that it looked silly, but it was far past an obsession. It was simply a necessity of his life. Sometimes it felt as if the string were playing with him as much as he played with the string, unraveling and changing portions of his life.

For one thing, Jessica had been much improved over the summer. The new genetic inhalant therapy they'd tried had been successful, and though the doctors warned them that it was probably just another stopgap, research was coming out which showed that it might constitute a very real cure for cystic fibrosis. Dan basked in Jessica's ever-growing wellness.

The phone rang, and Anita leaped to answer it. "Yes?" she asked, breathless. "Yes, this is Anita Brewer." There was a long silence, and finally she said, in a dull voice, "I see."

She hung up the phone and said, "I didn't get it."

Anita's pain hit Dan so hard he couldn't breathe. "It will be all right, honey," he said, and tried to give her a hug. *Now maybe she'll pay more attention to me. And to Jessica.*

"Oh, leave me alone, you idiot," she said. "What do you know?" She left the room.

Dan followed her, but she slammed and locked the bedroom door. He fixed dinner for Jessica. "What's wrong with Mom?" she asked. "She doesn't feel good," he said. "She didn't get the contract." "Oh."

Later that night, as he played with the string, images of Anita as a graduate student filled his mind. How radiant she had been, immersed in the complexities of architecture, realizing for the first time that she could really be top-notch. He'd been amazed that someone so talented could care for him, had been overwhelmed with gratitude when she'd agreed to marry him.

It was that feeling of being on the cutting edge which pleased her, which was her reason for life, he realized, not him, not even Jessica.

Still, it pleased him to see her like that, filled with the power her own way of thinking brought her, the power which came from others accepting it as valid, praising it, giving her awards, peopling her visionary structures as they were constructed and used. There was a truth about her which transcended her day to day pettiness and that was what Dan loved about her, even though his life with her could be miserable if he let her get to him.

But his image of the happy family battled with that, as if by desire he could force their hearts and minds into some fifties sitcom of harmonious life even if it went all frayed and off the edges. It hadn't been easy having a terminally ill child, but Jessica was better now.

And as he worked, the vision of Anita happy in her profession receded. She had a good job at the firm. Why couldn't she be happy with that? It was important that Jessica have a good, stable home. Anita didn't have to work so hard, every evening, and weekends too. She could afford to let some of that slide.

As he worked that evening, anger slowly subsided into a self-righteous stubbornness. But earlier than usual, Dan decided that he was too tired to make much more headway and put it away. The bedroom door was still locked, so he lay down on the couch and threw the afghan over himself.

The next evening, Frank came by. His footsteps on the old wood treads of the back porch were tired and hesitant. He stood outside the screen door for a few moments just staring, not into the room, but just staring.

Dan jumped up from the table. The string had felt dead in his hands tonight, and he felt as if he was making no progress at all. No sooner did he

pull one strand out than another portion knotted even more tightly. He opened the door and pulled Frank in. "Sit down," he said. "What's wrong?"

Frank's face worked, but he didn't cry, as Dan feared he would. Instead he said, "One of the kids ran out in the road today and got hit by a car."

Anita looked up from across the room. "Oh, no," she breathed.

"Yeah, well, it was real lucky. Kid just bounced off the car and got a lot of scrapes. Flew through the air onto the grass next to the road. But it was my fault."

"It was?" asked Dan.

"Yeah," he said. "I think so. They told me it wasn't, that it was Cassandra's job to be watching the kids, and another aide that's been there for years, but I'd just turned away to tie somebody's shoe and this silly kid was over the fence — kind of a wild boy, everybody says, they've been thinking about telling his parents they can't handle him anyway — "

"So it wasn't your fault, Frank," said Dan.

"It doesn't sound like it to me," said Anita. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm too old for this sort of thing," said Frank. "I saw him go, but you know, I just can't move too fast anymore."

Jessica ran downstairs. "Frank!" she said, and hugged him. Then she was out the door.

"I don't think I'm going back," said Frank. He stood and shrugged.

"You're not leaving already, are you?" asked Dan. "Have a beer."

Frank did, but they couldn't coax any more words out of him, and after an hour he left.

When Anita shut down her computer just afterward, Dan was startled. "So early?" he asked.

"What's the use?" she asked. "I've given it my best. I've tried as hard as I can try. I know I've done good work. I know the proposal was excellent. I don't know what happened, Dan. What's the point? I might as well face it. I'm just going to be another obscure, faceless architect working in some huge firm, pandering to the vision of some old fart prima donna all my life." She laughed wryly. "I thought I'd be that old fart prima donna. Oh, Dan, I had so many hopes."

That night Dan slipped the string into the drawer very early and went to bed. He didn't get it out again the next night, or the next.

"Why aren't you doing your string, Dad?" Jessica asked one night.

"Oh, I just got tired of it," he said.

"Please do it some more," she asked. "I liked it when you did."

"No," he said. "It was just a silly thing."

"It wasn't," she said, and he remembered the look she had given him from the kitchen door that night when he'd carried her back to bed.

She knew. She knew, anyway, what he thought had been happening. They had always been so close.

He hugged her now. "It was just a string, honey. That's all. A little game for Daddy, a puzzle. It was taking up all my time."

"Something like that *should* take up all of your time," she said, and he was startled by the gravity and conviction in her voice.

Two weeks later Dan got a call at work about Jessica, who had been suddenly unable to breathe at school. An ambulance had just picked her up.

Dan rushed to the hospital. Anita was already there, in Jessica's room. Jessica had an oxygen mask over her face.

"They don't know what happened," she said, crying. "Oh, Dan, I just can't stand it. I guess I was hoping that she was really better, even though it just doesn't make sense. They kept saying that it was experimental."

Dan held her as she cried, and looked over her shoulders onto Jessica's still face.

They decided to take turns staying with her in intensive care. Anita took the first night, and after Dan had dropped off some clothes and books for her, he went home to a dark, empty house.

He turned on the kitchen light, opened the drawer, and got out the string.

It was just a rough, inert mass of cord. Nothing more. He was an idiot, a crazy man, to believe that such things were possible, no matter what the evidence seemed to be. He bent over it for an hour or more, but found, to his surprise, that he was crying. What had gone wrong? His little girl had been coming alive. Now it was all back the way it was before. How many times had they run this hospital drill before? How many nights by her bedside while she struggled for breath, the innocent victim of their gene sequences? Shit on this string, shit on this idiocy, shit on this stupid, imperfect life where little girls died for no good reason, where genocide and hate prevailed, where nothing was ever any good.

He flung it into the corner of the room and turned out the light. His heart, when he climbed the stairs alone, was heavier than it had ever felt in his entire life, even when they'd finally had the sweat test done on Jessica and found that she had CF. Because it had seemed within his power, during these last few months, to actually change things for the better, the contrast was grim and complete.

And maybe, he thought, on the verge of sleep, it *had* been within his power, and he had, quite miserably, failed. Out of selfishness and greed, as if he were in a Grimm's fairy tale, because he had wanted his own way, his own vision, to prevail, and because there were places of darkness in that vision of which he could not ever be aware.

Dan woke, and the room was black.

And yet, something had happened.

His body felt light and spacious, and he wondered if he was dreaming. Within his interior was not blood and cells, not bones and blood and muscles.

Instead, he was a tangled skein, caught by a tree limb, utterly twisted, never to be free. He was himself that odd, unknotted yet inextricably tangled entity, one end loose in birth and the other in death, and this strange passage called life was an immense and tangled surprise, one which all the thought and effort in the world, every effort which time would afford him, could not unravel. There were certain givens in this equation, that was all.

And yet he could see, as he lay there in the dark, that this knot, this amazement of himself, was composed of points. Point after point after point, spilling into infinity, uncountable. Whether a myriad of intersecting planes made soft and malleable beneath his questing fingers or a fluid, graceful line, each point glowed, glowed so strongly in the dark so he was surprised that the string of which he was composed did not light the room. He expected at any moment that a nimbus would surround him, or the bed on which he lay. Or it might come from the ceiling, the floor, the walls, the thin lace curtains, the heavy old furniture his mother had polished for years of his life. Anywhere. Everywhere. He was absorbed into the infinite number of points he had become, every single one a nexus he knew he would never understand.

But he discovered that he could move them around.

And then, it was as if the string was free at every point, that each point had an infinitesimal gap between it and the next, and impulse flew from point

to point like neurons firing, only his entire body was free and loose, releasing information, pure intelligence which was not really him, into some dark, fathomless void, and he was fully, sharply awake.

He rose from bed and went downstairs. He didn't even have to turn on the light to do that; forty years of navigating the house had removed every surprise.

The string, when he flipped on the kitchen light, was still lying forlorn in the corner, just a dirty string tied to two knives.

He walked over, picked it up, and sat at the table. And as he worked on it once more, the pain drained from him. And every point on the string began to glow.

He knew he wouldn't stop again.

**I**T WAS two weeks before they were sure that the medicine was adjusted correctly and they let Jessica go home. She was going to be all right. It was just so new that sometimes they overshot. A lot of fine tuning to be done, the doctors said.

When Anita came home the next day after work, she looked happy and troubled at the same time.

"What's up?" he asked.

"It's kind of strange," she said. "I've been offered a fellowship by a committee at Harvard. I told them it must be a mistake, that I never applied, and they said that they simply considered the people they thought were the best in the field and deliberated until they came to a conclusion. Dan, I'm stunned."

"You knew you were good," he said. "That's wonderful. So what's wrong?"

She went into the living room and sat down. "I've been meaning to tell you for some time, Dan, but I'm such a coward."

"What is it?" he asked, feeling the chilling inevitability of the moment, when he would have to let all his hopes and dreams and plans diverge from what was going to happen.

For Anita.

"I'm just not happy with you," she said. "But it was easier to stay together than not. Everything is so — settled, here. And I guess I felt guilty about — about wanting to leave you. But now — "

"What about Jessica?" he whispered, because he couldn't make his voice any louder. He was filled with fear, he realized, not just because she was leaving but because she might take Jessica with her.

Anita sat down on the couch. "I've thought about it a lot. I've read a lot too, Dan. It's not just me. It's hard on everyone who has a child with a disability. You've done all the work of raising her because I've been so afraid of getting close and then losing her. She doesn't need me like she needs you."

"She does!" he said.

"She doesn't and you know it. She needs to live here, because she has to be close to the University. I'm not thinking about anything drastic, really. I just want to move to Boston so I can concentrate on this project. I know it's kind of abstract to you, but I think I can make a real difference in the field. So many new things are happening in architecture. I want to be part of it."

"I know," he said as gently as he could.

She stood and looked at him very directly. "I still want to be a part of Jessica's life."

Just not yours.

He didn't know what to say. But he had to say something.

"Don't worry," he said. "We'll work something out. I think this is the best thing, for now, anyway." He hoped she couldn't see how his heart ached. But at least Jessica would be here. He could manage.

"Then it's settled," she said.

Is that all? he thought, as supper preparations brought them together, as they had for eight years.

He realized that, oddly enough, it was.

Frank cheered him that night by dropping by, his step light once more. "They kept calling me every day, even the kids got on the phone to tell me that they missed me. God, I'm glad to be back there. It's great to be needed."

And every night, Dan bent over the string without even thinking of ever unraveling it. One straight piece of string, forever tangled. The pain he felt from Anita leaving was still just as strong, but oddly enough, it helped to channel it into the string. It seemed to give off a cool, bright energy, when the house was quiet, and he didn't have to think about how empty the future would seem without her sharp energy, her presence at her CAD every night, even her chiding tongue. He had to let her go.

They spent the week dividing things up. Dan helped her pack. She didn't take much, but went through all the drawers and cupboards. "I'll need these pots," she'd say, and he'd say, "Take them." It was like that with everything.

On the last evening she was to be there, the scent of the blossoming snowball bushes his mother had planted wafted in the window.

Anita and Jessica had both gone to bed. He reached up on the shelf, but felt no string. He hoisted himself up on the counter and, kneeling, peered at the empty shelf. Nothing.

Heart beating hard, he looked at all the knickknack shelves on both sides of the window over the sink. He saw that Anita had taken his mother's little horses — well, that was all right. He moved planters and statues that had been there since he was a kid — some of them even stuck to the ancient, dusty wood. Nothing.

Maybe he'd put it in a drawer instead. Panicking, he pulled open drawer after drawer, rummaged through them, and then opened the lower cupboards, completely out of his head, and started throwing the pans that were left out onto the kitchen floor.

Anita appeared in the doorway, hair tousled from sleep. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? My string is gone, that's what's wrong."

Anita was silent. Dan stared at her.

"You didn't."

"I did. I hate that string, Dan. If you hadn't sat there like a zombie with it for the past six months, we might not have ended up like this."

Dan knew that was true, but not for the reasons she thought.

He switched on the porch light and ran outside.

Luckily, the trash hadn't been collected yet, but the pile was horrendous, full of the debris they'd discarded in their massive housecleaning.

It was two in the morning when he finally found it, sodden with grease — in a bag of rancid garbage.

"Thank God," he whispered.

He reverently took it into the house and filled the sink with soap and a little bleach. He let it sit for a few minutes, careful to disturb it as little as possible, and then carefully squished water through it and pressed it between a towel.

He looked up, and Jessica was standing in the kitchen doorway again.

"You're getting to be quite a night owl," he said.

"The medicine keeps me awake, I think," she said, watching him with wide eyes. "What happened to the string?"

"Oh," he said. "I accidentally threw it out."

She was quiet for a moment. He suspected she knew the truth.

"I'm glad you found it," she said finally. "I think the string is very important."

Then she walked across the room and hugged him.

As she stood there, pressed against him, he held her small shoulders with one arm, switched off the light with the other hand, and looked out the window at the night.

It was clear and cold, and stars shimmered through the bare tree branches which laced together in front of the glass.

He thought that all the space which surrounded them at this moment, stretching out galaxy beyond galaxy, was nothing compared to the infinity of light, the immense, glowing, and tangled grandeur within the two of them. ☺

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*Nina Kiriki Hoffman is having quite a year. Two of her stories, "Skeleton Key" (August 1993) and "Haunted Humans" (July 1994) are finalists for the Nebula. Her novel, The Silent Strength of Stones, will appear in September, and her story "Home For Christmas" (January 1995) has generated more discussion than any story we've published in the last six months.*

*She returns to these pages with a story about divorce, marriage, and the stranger side of love.*

# For Richer, for Stranger

*By Nina Kiriki Hoffman*

I'VE NEVER BEEN CERTAIN it was death that parted us. I used the term as grounds in the divorce proceedings, and they thought I was crazy, because Rich attended. He didn't protest it, though, so maybe he knew he was dead too. My lawyer wanted me to go with my first choice, incompatibility, but I held out for death.

"I think you should change your mind, Penny," Rich said to me during recess. "You stick with this death line and we may never get asundered." He looked so dapper and kind; I had a secret desire to faint in his arms in hopes that he would carry me away. I think I had that desire the first time I saw him, when he was still Rich, but it faded when I got to know him. Today he was wearing a blue suit, gray shirt, and powder-blue tie; his dark hair curled nicely, and the suit made his eyes look more intensely blue.

He put some quarters in the vending machine and bought me a coffee with cream and sugar, just the way I liked it.

That's how I knew the man I married was dead. Rich never bought me anything just the way I liked it. He bought me things just the way he liked

them, which inevitably meant coffee, black. I looked at this stranger in Rich's clothes — in Rich's face and hands and feet — and smiled at him, thinking maybe not getting asundered was just the way I liked it too, a thought I wouldn't have dared to entertain two weeks before. "Think I'll stick, Rich," I said, accepting the coffee.

He made that click sound between his tongue and the roof of his mouth that meant "this is inevitable, and I approve." He used to use it for calling horses on our weekend walks in the country — two or three quick clicks, and the nags would come to him. His whole vocabulary had changed since he died. "Okay, Pix," he said, to reinforce the click.

I took my coffee and went away, then, because nobody had called me Pix since my high school sweetheart, Alan, died — two years before I met the first Rich and married him, and six years before I met the imposter Rich who had just bought me coffee.

How had he known? How did he know *anything*? The man I married wouldn't have been able to recognize me if I was with two other brunettes, and this man knew my secret childhood nickname. I went into the ladies room, threw out the coffee, and sat on a toilet (the only handy piece of furniture), clutching my stomach, which had shooting pains in it by that time.

Gretchen, my lawyer, found me there a few minutes later when she came in to sweep all the escaping strands of blonde-brown hair back into her chignon. I had left the stall door open; she saw me in the mirror. She stooped in front of me, putting creases in her green satin skirt. "Penny, do you know what you want? You're surely not making this easy for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Changing grounds in the middle of the case. This death business. Are you sure you want to ditch the guy? I'm starting to suspect you don't."

"He's not the man I married," I said.

"You're divorcing the man you married," she said. "It would save steps if you stopped the divorce — that is, if you're thinking of marrying the man he is now. God, I can't believe the level of metaphysics involved here."

"How can I want to marry him when I don't even know him?" I said. "I think I want to marry him."

"I'm going to go talk to his lawyer and see if we can't all throw in the towel now," she said, "unless you think Rich might be playing a little trick

on you to get you to settle for less. I mean, if you thought he was crazy, maybe he figures you'll be sympathetic. Maybe he figures you'll figure he has a diminished earning capacity and shouldn't be soaked for a big alimony check every month. Is this new him manipulating your thoughts in any of those directions?"

"Don't be silly," I said. "The new Rich told the court about the Costa Mesa property. Honestly, Gretchen. I had no idea he owned that land, and that he had such a big monthly income from it. Four years and I've never heard of it. Now he wants to give it to me as a settlement. Did you see his lawyer jumping up and down during that part?"

"That was pretty amusing," she said. "If it was some sort of trick, Rich has a very devious mind. I'm going to ask you one more time. Do you want me to halt proceedings now?"

I clutched my stomach and frowned, with my eyes closed. I thought a moment. Then I said, "I will if he will."

"I'll go check it out," said Gretchen.

The judge gave us a big scolding for wasting his time, and said we should have thought this thing through better, and if we were incapable of thinking about it, our lawyers should have been more responsible, and if he ever saw us in his court again he would divorce us immediately in revenge. I couldn't follow his logic. Rich was laughing, and that only seemed to infuriate him more.

"Come on," I said, "Let's go home."

He had been living in his own apartment for two months—since I kicked him out of the one we had shared. He leaned forward and looked at me. "Really?"

I took his arm. His hesitation made me more sure than ever that he was someone new. "Come home," I said. Now or never. We could start with an early dinner, then see if the evening followed the old pattern or not. If he still ended lovemaking with hurt and humiliation, I knew the judge I wanted to see.

As we walked out of the building, Gretchen joined us. "Call me for lunch, Penny. Don't call me for any more divorce work. I don't think my budget can take it."

"Don't worry," said Rich.

Gretchen gave him a pointed look. "On the other hand," she said.

He grinned at her. Couldn't be Rich; Rich had no sense of humor where my independence was concerned. He hated it if I had lunch with a girlfriend almost more than he hated it when my advertising buddies and I went out to lunch.

He wrote Gretchen a check for a thousand dollars. "Just in case she needs you again, here's a provisional retainer," he said, handing it to her.

She swallowed. "What if she doesn't?"

"For services rendered," he said.

"Penny, you witnessed that, didn't you? Now I'm going to deposit this."

"Isn't there something fishy about your taking money from your client's adversary?"

"Not since you halted the proceedings." She blew us both a kiss and walked off.

"I don't know, Rich," I said. "I feel funny about you paying my lawyer for not doing anything."

"You want me to take the check back?"

"No," I said. If it came down to divorce again, I might invoke that check as a provisional retainer, after all. A drop in the ocean of lawyers' fees, but that drop meant a lot more to me than it did to Gretchen or Rich. It would make things easier.

"Your car or mine?" he asked as we went down the courthouse steps. The day was stormy. Dark clouds looked ready to spit, though there was no rain falling yet. I leaned closer to his warmth. He put his arm around me, with a little hug.

"Both, I think," I said. I looked up at his face and took a chance. "You know the way home?"

He could have run with that, one way or the other. He said, "Okay if I follow you?" so I still wasn't sure.

I said all right. We went to the underground city parking lot; I waited in my little blue-and-silver Honda CRX for his black sixties Mustang to pull up behind me, then I led the way back to the apartment we had lived in for four good-to-worse years. He pulled into his old parking spot, but it was the one next to mine, so I wasn't sure if that was evidence or not.

"Mr. Zamoyoski," said Tomas, the doorman. He seemed surprised, but I couldn't tell if it was pleased or dismayed surprise. Rich smiled at him and waved. Did Rich recognize Tomas or not?

He glanced around the lobby of the building. Pale streaky brown linoleum for the floor, lighter brown wallpaper, two ailing palm trees near the front window, ranks of tarnished brass-fronted mailboxes on the left wall, the door to the staircase and to the manager's apartment on the far wall, two elevators with a standing, sand-filled ashtray between them on the right wall. "Who picked this place, you or me?"

"You were living here when we got married," I said carefully. "I moved in."

"And you got custody of the apartment when we split up?"

I punched the "up" button on the elevator summons panel. "I was mad," I said.

"Good for you."

The left-hand elevator door opened and we stepped into a gray-floored, brown-walled cube. I waited a moment to see if Rich would punch the fifth floor button. He glanced at me, at the buttons, at me, and shrugged. I reached past him and punched the correct button. The elevator started with its characteristic jerk. When I was alone, I waited for the right-hand elevator; I was always sure the left-hand one would stall. I had heard stories from our neighbors about people trapped overnight, trapped until they ran out of air, trapped forever in the left-hand elevator. Even if it ran all right, how could it help being haunted? Rich had heard all the same stories, and all he ever did was sneer at them.

We rode upward in silence. I peeked at him. Was he Rich? Was this all a charade? If it was, Gretchen was right; he was very devious. This didn't feel like our last ride in an elevator together, right after the breakup. The tension then had been so strong I felt like I was walking through a snow storm all the time, fighting wind and flying flakes. I had had problems sleeping—my mind racing a million miles an hour, not settling anywhere. We had stood at opposite corners of the elevator, like fighters, as we rode down, his suitcases between us. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I had no right to ask him to leave, that I was imagining he was being mean to me when really he wasn't, that it was a big mistake to try to change anything this early—why couldn't I try a little longer? Rich was always talking about compromise. Hadn't he given up all those evenings with the boys to stay home with me? And here I was objecting to his attentions. Didn't I love him?

I loved him, I loved him. I wasn't sure I loved him. How did anybody ever know?

"Do you like this building?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I got used to it."

"I don't think it suits you. You'd be better off in a place with more colors."

"What have you been studying since you left? Underground drug culture? Rich, you're color-blind, remember? I had to safety-pin your ties to your suits so you wouldn't clash."

"Even I can tell this place is too dull," he said after a moment.

The elevator jerked and stopped. I looked at the buttons. Both the four and the five were flashing. "Oh, great," I said. "Finally this happens. Now we're stuck." I pressed the five button again. Nothing happened.

He pressed the stop button.

"What good will that do?" I said. "We're already stopped."

"Thought I'd try some reverse psychology." He pressed the emergency button. The elevator dropped an inch. I screamed and grabbed his arm. He frowned. "Aren't these things supposed to have phones in them?"

"I'll get someone's attention," I said, and screamed again, so loudly Rich covered his ears; his whole face squinted, as if he had just tasted a really sour lemon.

"Stop," he said, when I had to breathe. "You'll wake the dead."

We stared at each other, our eyes wide. I felt some situational tenseness coming on. I had never liked small closed spaces. And here I was, alone with, possibly, my husband, who had taken me closer to death than I cared for on several occasions.

I gripped his lapels. "You've got to tell me, and tell me now. Are you Rich? Are you really Rich?"

"I'm Richer."

I screamed again. "Make another pun and I'll burst your eardrums!" I yelled.

"It wasn't supposed to be a joke."

"What happened to you? Did you just grow up? Are you playing a trick on me? Or what?"

"Well, Pix," he said, "somebody realized you deserved better. So here I am."

"What are you saying? That you're God's gift to women?"

"Only to you, sweetheart," he said, and he looked as though he believed it.

"If you're better, why aren't you doing something about this elevator?"  
"What do you want me to do?"

"Fix it."

"Done." He banged the button panel twice and the elevator started upward again.

"Hey! Why didn't you do that to begin with?"

"Had to exhaust the other alternatives first."

The elevator stopped with a jerk and opened its door. We were the usual one foot below floor level. I was glad just to be alive, so I didn't gripe about the underhang. Rich took my elbow and helped me up and out, and I pulled him after me. "You deserve a better building," he said. "I don't know what I could have been thinking about, having you move into this dump."

"I think we were both thinking about money," I said.

"Why?"

"As far as I knew, we didn't have much. Having a doorman seemed like big-league stuff to me."

He stooped and spoke into my ear in a low voice. "I've checked out this Rich guy's assets. He has plenty."

"You're kidding! You mean, aside from that Costa Mesa property?"

"Municipal bonds, T-bills, a small stock portfolio — all triple B's and up."

"And you, the perfect gentleman, you didn't bring this stuff up at the trial?"

"I was going to let them grill it out of me. Thought I'd sweat and protest and look guilty as hell. I don't think your lawyer knew about it, though."

"How could she when I didn't?"

"Homework."

I unlocked the door to fifth floor apartment D. Rich followed me in, staring about as though he'd never seen the place before, when actually the real Rich had selected all the furniture, drapes, and carpeting with the help of his previous girlfriend, Marcia, an interior decorator with sadistic tendencies. The couch and chairs were shaped and colored something like elephant ears bent in the middle, with spiky black legs supporting them. Under this dingy-gray-brown furniture lurked a circular rug, cream-colored with large orange and red spots eclipsing each other all over it. The room had made me gasp the first time I saw it. Rich had taken that as a sign of approval.

"Those are your fish," I said, pointing to a tankful of fancy goldfish, an integral part of the living room design.

"Fish?" He made a pained face halfway to the sour-lemon face he had made while I was screaming earlier.

"Fish. The only thing you ever really loved."

"Fish. Apparently I was a man of strange passions."

"I wanted to flush them all down the toilet for a while, but then I thought, it's not their fault some reprehensible character bought them. I always wondered why you didn't take them with you when you moved out, though."

"I probably didn't really care about them. I probably just used them to make you jealous. Before we go straight to the bedroom so I can show you all the neat things the aliens taught me when they took over my body, how about some coffee and a cheese plate?"

I gulped. "I thought dinner," I said.

"That would be nice." He took off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair, then loosened his tie and unbuttoned his top button — exactly what Rich always did when he came home, kind of a claiming ceremony, I always thought — this is my home ground and now I can relax. "What have you got in the kitchen?"

Feeling a little sick after seeing Rich reclaiming ground I had wrested away from him, I put my hands to my stomach and shrugged. I had invited him back. Why had I ever taken such a stupid risk?

He glanced around the apartment. A hallway led off to the left, a dining alcove opened up beyond the living room, and a door was set in the right wall, almost hidden beside the entertainment center and its accompanying book, record, and video cassette shelves. He scratched his head. Then he skirted the living room furniture, ducking away from the huge arrangement of dead pampas grass fronds and peacock feathers set on a pedestal against the left wall, and headed for the dining alcove. It opened onto the kitchen.

I took his coat and my own and hung them in the closet, behind the door in the right wall. Hell to pay now. The man I married hated for me to step out of line, and I had walked off the graph paper altogether, what with the divorce proceedings and changing the apartment locks and getting the two strongest guys from the advertising agency to stay with me while Rich packed his things and left; I had even had them take turns sleeping on my couch for a couple weeks, except they ended up on the floor, since the couch was less

comfortable than the rug. I had planned my escape so well. And now I just walked back into the cage.

I could take my purse and a few things and head out the door. I could find refuge with several people — Gretchen, even. Although I hadn't told her everything about my relationship with Rich. I hadn't told anybody the full extent. I tried not to know it myself. I hated victim statistics.

"Penny?" Rich peered out of the kitchen. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up. "Where are the spices?"

I let go of my stomach, sighed, and wandered over to join him in the kitchen.

He had spread thin frozen fillets of fish on the broiling pan, and cut uneven slices of bread off a round of sourdough. He was also mixing something in one of the glass mixing bowls; a fork lay beside the bowl, dripping light yellow batter. Rich had never cooked while he lived with me, but he could have learned something from two months of neo-bachelor life — or maybe he knew it before we got married and just concealed his ability? "Lemon pepper, I thought," he said.

A long teasing appetizer before we got to his idea of entrée, I thought. He's going to be nice to me until I really believe this fiction of a new him, and then the real him will come back and savage me. I should leave now.

"Are you okay, Pix?" he asked.

I went to the slender cabinet recessed into the sidewall and opened it to reveal our well-stocked spice shelves. I picked the lemon pepper from its spot in the center of the alphabet and handed it to him. He liked things organized in easily understandable order, even things he never used.

He gripped my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Would you leave now, please?"

He blinked. "What, you don't like fish?"

"I like fish all right. I'm just wondering if you'd leave."

"Okay, if it means that much to you. Can we have lunch tomorrow, then? Maybe in a public place?"

"No."

He looked at me with an injured innocent expression I knew well. He washed his hands in the kitchen sink, then cocked his head at the fish. He frowned and glanced at me. He dried his hands on the towel threaded through the refrigerator handle, then looked at me and smiled. "Maybe next life," he said, and went to the living room, with me following.

"My coat?" he said.

I pointed to the closet. He went and fetched his coat. "It was something about the coat, wasn't it? What?" He put it on, stared at a red spot on the rug, then glanced up at me. "Let's see. I came in," he said, going to the front door and walking through his own actions. "Came in, took off coat." He draped it across the chair. "Loosened tie, unbuttoned shirt. I get it. You want me to cook in my coat?" He put the coat back on. "Sleeves in the egg batter!"

I felt a smile surface before I could stifle it.

"How am I supposed to know what you want unless you tell me? You want me to take these goldfish away? Kill them? Get out of your kitchen? What?"

"Just leave," I said.

"Pix."

I said nothing. He smiled, shrugged, and walked out the door. I ran across the room and locked the door and chained it. I leaned against the door.

"I love you," he said through the door. "I love you, Penny." Then I heard his footsteps receding down the hall.

With my back to the door I looked around at the apartment. An awful place. Why was I defending it? I hated everything about it, though I hated the Marcia touches more than the Rich touches. We were always too poor to redecorate. I had asked him how he could afford this furniture in the first place, and he had said lucky stock speculations before he met me, all dried up now.

I turned and unlocked the door. "Rich?" I said.

He was waiting by the elevators, the "down" summons button glowing red. He turned and looked at me.

"Can we go to a hotel?" I asked.

He smiled.

He came back while I packed some things in an overnight bag. "The fish is just going to waste. Too late to refreeze it. Why don't I go ahead and get it in the oven? We could eat here and then go out," he said. "This time I'll keep my coat on. What do you think?"

"No," I said. "Let's eat out. Pretend it's a date or something. Nothing permanent. Okay?"

"All right."

This solicitude and compliance was alien. Devious, I thought. There

ought to be some test a person could do to figure out — "Where did you go to high school, Rich?" I asked as I folded my lavender nightgown.

"Not that one. How about the red one?"

"What red one?"

He reached into the drawer and pulled out my red nightgown. It was cut in the same pattern as three others.

"You like that one?"

"Yes," he said. He handed it to me.

He had never known what Marcia was doing with that ugly rug in the living room. He had thought it was just neutral overlapping circles. He had never understood why I thought the living room so uncomfortable, because he couldn't distinguish shades of color.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I can't tell you."

"Why'd you call me Pix?"

He frowned. "You look like a Pix."

"Are you going to turn back into the real Rich?"

"I don't know. I hope not."

"If there's a chance, then there's no future for us, you understand? Not if you might suddenly be him. I have to — I have to take care of myself. I have to protect myself."

He sat on the edge of the waterbed, his elbows on his knees, hands dangling. Even his clothes looked defeated.

"Look," I said, "for a while I didn't understand what was happening. It started out seeming like such a great fairytale marriage. Then things changed. You started getting weirder and meaner in bed and around the house. It happened so slowly I didn't really notice, until one morning I woke up and thought, where was I four years ago? I wouldn't have let any of these things be done to me. If someone used me the way you did, I would have drugged his wine and beaten him up, then left him in the middle of a park without any clothes on. When did I stop being that person who was strong enough to take care of herself?" I let the nightgown slip from my fingers to the floor. "You kept saying if I loved you, I'd give you another chance. If I loved you, I'd be understanding about a few personal quirks that only happened sometimes. If I was really a good woman...if I really knew what love meant...if you could only beat some sense into my head...."

He sat on the edge of the waterbed and looked up at me. "All those ifs?" "Always ifs."

"If I promise to try not to if at you anymore, will you let me take you out to dinner?"

"No strings!"

He sat up. He grinned at me. "Dinner. That's all."

He was perfect at dinner. He's been perfect for the week since. I am terrified that I will learn to trust him. The only thing I've found worth trusting in this life is that nobody is trustworthy. Every time I forget that, I get hurt.

But he's so good now. If he is worth trusting, I would hate to miss the opportunity.

Sometimes I wish I could turn off my head. ☺



## SEARCH FOR EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL STUPIDITY

*"Since the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence  
doesn't seem to be getting anywhere..."*



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# A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

## GREGORY BENFORD

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### THE FOURTH DIMENSION

**S**UPPOSE that next to you, right now, a pale gray sphere appeared. It grew from baseball-sized to a diameter as big as you — grainy, gray, cool to the touch — then shrank to a point...and disappeared.

You would probably interpret it as a balloon blown up, then deflated. But where did the flat balloon go?

Or you could realize that you had been visited by a denizen of a higher dimension — a four dimensional sphere, or hypersphere. In three dimensions, it looks like a sphere, the most perfect of figures, just as a sphere projected in two dimensions makes a circle. The fact that this isn't an everyday occurrence implies that travel between dimensions is uncommon, but not that it is illogical.

Probably you would not have thought of such ideas before 1884. That is due to the Reverend Edwin Abbott Abbott, M.A., D.D., head-

master of the City of London School.

Respected, well liked, he led a strictly regular life, as proper as a parallelogram. He had published quite a few conventional books with titles like *Through Nature to Christ*, *Parables for Children* and *How to Tell the Parts of Speech*. These did not prepare the world for his sudden excursion into the fantastic, in 1884. Beneath his exterior he was a bit odd, and his short novel *Flatland* has proved his only hedge against oblivion, an astonishingly prescient fantasy of mathematics.

Abbott's oddity began with his repeated name, which a mathematical wit might see as A times A or A Squared,  $A^2$ . Abbott's protagonist is A Square, a much troubled spirit. Liberated into another character, Abbott seems to have broken out of his cover as a prim reverend, and poured out his feelings.

The book has a curiously obsessive quality, which perhaps accounts

for its uneasy reception. Reviewers termed it "soporific," "prolix," "mortally tedious," "desperately facetious," while others found it "clever," "fascinating," "never been equaled for clarity of thought," and "mind broadening," and they even likened it to *Gulliver's Travels*. This last comparison is just, because beneath the math drolleries lurks a penetrating satire of Victorian society.

A Square's society is as constrained as were the prim Victorians. Women are not full figures but mere lines. Soldiers are triangles with sharp points, adept at stabbing. The more sides, the higher the status, so hexagons outrank squares, and the high priests are perfect circles.

In a delicious irony, the upper classes are polygons with equal sides — but their views certainly do not embrace equality. Mathematicians term equal-sided figures "regular," and in nineteenth century terms, proper upper class polygons are of the regular sort.

A Square learns that his view of the world is too narrow. There is a third dimension, grander and exciting, but his hidebound fellows cannot see it. This opening-out is the central imaginative event of the novel, Abbott echoing an emergent idea.

In the late nineteenth century higher dimensions were fashionable.

Mathematicians had laid the foundations for rigorous work in higher-dimensional space, and physicists were about to begin using four-dimensional spacetime. Twenty centuries after Euclid, the mathematician Bernhard Riemann took a great leap in 1854, liberating the idea of dimensions from our spatial senses. He argued that ever since René Descartes had described spaces with algebra, the path to discussing higher dimensions had been clear, but unwalked.

Descartes' analytic geometry defined lines as things described by one set of coordinates, distances along one axis. A plane needed two independent coordinate sets, a solid took three. With coordinates one could map an object, defining it quantitatively: not "Chicago is over that hill." but "Chicago is fifteen miles that way." This appealed more to our logical capacity, and less to our sensory experience.

Riemann described worlds of equal logical possibility, with dimensions ranging from one to infinity. They were not spatial in the ordinary sense. Instead, Riemann took dimension to refer to conceptual spaces, which he named manifolds.

This wasn't merely a semantic change. Weather, for example, depends on several variables — say,  $n$  — like temperature, pressure, wind

velocity, time of day, etc. One could represent the weather as a moving point in an  $n$ -dimensional space. A plausible model of everyday weather needs about a dozen variables, so to visualize it means seeing curves and surfaces in a twelve-dimensional world. No wonder we understand the motions of planets (which even Einstein only needed four dimensions to describe), but not the weather.

Riemann revolutionized mathematics and his general ideas diffused into our culture. By 1880, C.H. Hinton had pressed the issue by building elaborate models to further his extra-dimensional intuition; he tried to explain ghosts as higher-dimensional apparitions. Pursuing the analogy, he wrote of a fourth-dimensional God from whom nothing could be hidden. The afterlife, then, allowed spirits to move along the time dimension, reliving and reassessing moments of life. Spirits from hyperspace were the subject of J.K.F. Zollner's 1878 *Transcendental Physics*, which envisioned them moving everywhere by short-cut loops through the fourth dimension.

Mystics responded to the fashion by imagining that God, souls, angels and any other theological beings resided as literal beings of mass ("hypermatter") in four-space. This neatly explains why they can appear

anywhere they like, and God can be everywhere simultaneously, the way we can look down on a Flatland and perceive it as a whole. Some found such transports of the imagination inspiring, while others thought them crass and far too literal. I am unaware of Abbott himself ever subscribing to such beliefs.

Still, Abbott and his adventuresome Square longed for the strange. More than any other writer, Abbott coined the literary currency of dimensional metaphor. By having a point of view which is literally above it all, surveying the follies of a two-dimensional plane, Abbott can adroitly satirize the staid rigidities of his Victorian world. (Perhaps this is why he first published *Flatland* under a pseudonym.)

"Irregulars" are cruelly executed, for example. Do they stand for foreigners? Gypsies? Cripples? We are left to fill in some blanks, but the overall shape of the plot is clear — flights of fancy are punished, and A Square does not finish happily.

At a deeper level, the book harks toward deep scientific issues, and the difficulty of comprehending a physical reality beyond our immediate senses. This is the great theme of modern physics. The worlds of relativity and the quantum are beyond the rough-and-ready ideas we

chimpanzees have built into us, from our distant ancestors' experience at throwing stones and poking sticks on African plains.

Still deeper, in this fanciful narrative the good Reverend tries to speak indirectly of intense spiritual experience. The trip into the higher realm of three dimensions is a fine metaphor for a mystical encounter.

The thrust of the deceptively simple narrative is to make us examine our basic assumptions. After all, our visual perceptions of the world are two-dimensional patterns, yet we somehow know how to see three-dimensionality. One knows instantly the difference between a ball and a flat disk by their shading in available light. Objects move in front of each other, like a woman walking by a wall. We automatically discount a possible interpretation — that the woman has somehow dissolved the wall for an instant as she passes. Instead, we see her in her three-dimensionality. The eye has learned the world's geometry and discards any other scheme.

A Square learns this lesson early as he first visits Lineland in a dream. The only distinction the natives can have is in their length. They see each other as points, since they move along the same universal straight line. They estimate how far away others are by

their acute sense of hearing, picking up the difference between a bass left voice and a tenor right; the time lag in arrival tells the distance. The king is longest, men next, then boys are stubby lines. Women are mere points, of lower status. Their views of each other are partial and instinctive. They never dream of how narrowly they see their world.

This sets the stage for A Square's conceptual blowout when a Sphere visits him and yanks him up into the hallucinogenic universe of three dimensions. Its realities are surrealistic. A Square struggles to fathom what for us is instinctive.

The reality of three dimensions we take for granted, but for us, what is the reality of two dimensions? Would flatlanders have physical presence in our world — that is, could we perceive a two-dimensional universe embedded in our own? Could we yank them up into our world?

Flatlanders could be as immaterial as shadows, mere patterns in our view. If an isosceles triangle soldier cut your throat it would not hurt. Abbott did not consider this in his first edition, but in the second he says that A Square eventually believes that flatlanders have a small but real height in our universe. A Square discusses this with the ruler of Flatland:

I tried to prove to him that he was "high," as well as long and broad, although he did not know it. But what was his reply? "You say I am 'high'; measure my 'high-ness' and I will believe you." What could I do? I met his challenge!

If flatlanders were even quite thick, they would not be able to tell, if in that direction they had no ability to move or did not vary. Height *as a concept* would lie beyond their knowable range. Or if they did vary in height, but could not directly see this, they might ascribe the differences to qualitative features like charisma or character or "presence." There would be rather mysterious forces at work in their world, the Platonic shadows of a higher, finer reality.

If a flatlander soldier of genuine physical thickness attacked, it would cut us like a knife. Otherwise, it could not impinge upon us. We would remain oblivious to all events in the lesser dimensions.

In a sense, a truly two-dimensional flatlander faces a similar problem if it tries to digest food. A simple alimentary canal from stem to stern of, say, a circle would bisect it. To keep itself intact, a circle would have

to digest by enclosing whatever it used for food in pockets, opening one and passing food to the next like a series of locks in a canal, until eventually it excreted at the far end.

This is typical of the problems engaged by thinking in another dimension. Not until 1910 did artists respond to non-Euclidean spaces, with Cubism and its theories. Mute image and poetic metaphor, they said, were ways of perceiving what scientists could only describe in abstractions and analogies.

They were right, and many, including Picasso and Braque, struggled with the problem. Looking downward at lower dimensions is easy. Looking up strains us.

Visualizing the fourth dimension preoccupied both artists and geometers. A cube in 4D is called a tesseract. One way to think of it is to open a cubical cardboard box and look in. By perspective, you see the far end as a square. Diagonals (the cube edges) lead to the outer "corners" of a larger square—the cube face you're looking through. Now go to a 4D analogy. A hypercube is one small cube, sitting in the middle of a large cube, connected to it by diagonals. Or rather, that is how it would look to us, lowly 3D folk.

Cutting a hypercube in the right way allows one to unfold it and reform it into a 3D pattern of eight

cubes, just as a 3D cube can be made up of six squares. One choice looks like a sort of 3D cross. Salvador Dali used this as a crucifix in his 1954 painting *Christus Hypercubus*. Not only does the hypercube suggest the presence of a higher reality; Dali deals with the problem of projecting into lower dimensions. On the floor beneath the suspended hypercube, and the crucified Christ, is a checkerboard pattern — except directly below the hypercube. There, the hypercube's shadow forms a square cross. (Shadows are the only 2D things in our world; they have no thickness.) Comparing this simple cross with the reality of the hypercube which casts the shadow, we contemplate that our world is perhaps a pallid shadow of a higher reality, an implicit mystical message.

Robert Heinlein gave this a twist with "And He Built a Crooked House," in which a house built to this pattern folds back up, during an earthquake, into a true hypercube, trapping the inhabitants in four dimensions. Much panic ensues.

Rudy Rucker, mathematician and science fiction author, has taken A Square and Flatland into myriad fresh adventures. I met Rucker in the 1980s and found him much like his fictional narrators, inventive and wild, with a cerebral spin on the

world, a place he found only apparently commonplace. His *The Sex Sphere* (1983) satirizes dimensional intrusions, many short stories develop ideas only latent in *Flatland*, and his short story "Message Found in a Copy of Flatland" details how a figure much like Rucker himself returns to Abbott's old haunts and finds the actual portal into that world in the basement of a Pakistani restaurant. He finds that the triangular soldiers can indeed cut intruders from higher dimensions, and flatlanders are tasty when he gets hungry. As a sendup of the original it is pointed and funny.

In science fiction there have been many stories about creatures from the fourth dimension invading ours, generally with horrific results. Greg Bear's "Tangents" describes luring 4D beings into our space using sound. While we puzzle over whether an unseen fourth dimension exists, modern physics has used the idea in the Riemannian manner, to expand our conceptual underpinnings. Riemann saw a mathematical theme of conceptual spaces, not merely geometrical ones. Physics has taken this idea and run with it.

Abbott's solving the problem of flatlander physical reality by adding a tiny height to them was strikingly prescient. Some of the latest quan-

tum field theories of cosmology begin with extra dimensions beyond three, and then "roll up" the extras so that they are unobservably small — perhaps a billion billion billion times more tiny than an atom. Thus we are living in a universe only apparently spatially three-dimensional; infinitesimal but real dimensions lurk all about us. In some models there actually are *eighteen* dimensions in all!

Even worse, this rolling up occurs by what I call "wantum mechanics" — we want it, so it must happen. We know no mechanism which could achieve this, but without it we would end up with unworkable universes which could not support life. For example, in such field theories with more than three dimensions, which do not roll up, there could be no stable atoms, and thus no matter more complex than particles. Further, only in odd-numbered dimensions can waves propagate sharply, so 3D is favored over 2D. In this view, we live not only in the best of all possible worlds, but the only possible one.

How did this surreallyistically bizarre idea come about? From considering the form and symmetries of abstruse equations. In such chilly realms, beauty is often our only guide. The embarrassment of dimensions in some theories arises from a clarity

in starting with a theory which looks appealing, then hiding the extra dimensions from actually acting in our physical world. This may seem an odd way to proceed, but it has a history.

The greatest fundamental problem of physics in our time has been to unite the two great fundamental theories of the century, general relativity and quantum mechanics, into a whole, unified view of the world. In cosmology, where gravity dominates all forces, general relativity rules. In the realm of the atom, quantum processes call the tune.

They do not blend. General relativity is a "classical" theory in that it views matter as particles, with no quantum uncertainties built in. Similarly, quantum mechanics cannot include gravity in a "natural" way.

Here "natural" means in a fashion which does not violate our sense of how equations should look, their beauty. Aesthetic considerations are very important in science, not just in physics, and they are the kernel of many theories. The quantum theorist Paul Dirac was asked at Moscow University his philosophy of physics, and after a moment's thought wrote on the blackboard, "Physical laws should have mathematical beauty." The sentence has been preserved on the board to this day.

One can capture a theorist's imagination better with a "pretty" idea than with a practical one. There have even been quite attractive mathematical cosmologies which begin with a two-dimensional, expanding universe, and later jump to 3D, for unexplained reasons.

Einstein wove space and time together to produce the first true theory of the entire cosmos. He had first examined a spacetime which is "flat," that is, untroubled by curves and twists in the axes which determine coordinates. This was his 1905 special theory of relativity. He drew upon ideas which Abbott had already used.

The eminent British journal *Nature* published in 1920 a comparison of Abbott's prophetic theme:

(Dr. Abbott) asks the reader, who has consciousness of the third dimension, to imagine a sphere descending upon the plane of Flatland and passing through it. How will the inhabitants regard this phenomenon? ... Their experience will be that of a circular obstacle gradually expanding or growing, and then contracting, and they will attribute to growth in time what the external ob-

server in three dimensions assigns to motion in the third dimension. Transfer this analogy to a movement of the fourth dimension through three-dimensional space. Assume the past and future of the universe to be all depicted in four-dimensional space and visible to any being who has consciousness of the fourth dimension. If there is motion of our three-dimensional space relative to the fourth dimension, all the changes we experience and assign to the flow of time will be due simply to this movement, the whole of the future as well as the part always existing in the fourth dimension.

In special relativity, distance in spacetime is not the simple result we know from rectangular geometry. In the ordinary Euclidean geometry everyone learns in school, if "d" means a small change and the coordinates of space are called x, y and z, then we find a small length ( $ds$ ) in our space by adding the squares of each length, so that

$$(ds)^2 = (dx)^2 + (dy)^2 + (dz)^2$$

The symbol "d" really stands for

differential, so this is a differential equation.

Contrast special relativity, in which a small distance in space-time adds a length given by  $dt$ , a small change in time, multiplied by the speed of light,  $c$ :

$$(ds)^2 = (dx)^2 + (dy)^2 + (dz)^2 - (cdt)^2$$

The trick is that the extra length ( $cdt$ ) is subtracted, not added. This simple difference leads to a whole restructuring of the basic geometry. The mathematician Minkowski showed this some years after Einstein formulated special relativity.

A thicket of confusions lurks here. Reflect that the total small (or differential, in mathematical language) length is  $(ds)$ , found by taking the square root of the above equation. But if  $(cdt)$  is greater than the positive (first three) terms, then  $(ds)$  is an imaginary number! What can this mean? Physically, it means the rules for moving in this four-dimensional (4D) space are complex and contrary to our 3D intuitions. Different kinds of curves are called "spacelike" and "timelike," because they have very different physical properties.

Einstein was fond of saying that he viewed the world as 4D, with people existing in it simultaneously. This meant that in 4D the whole life

of a person (their "world-line") was on view. Life was eternal, in a sense — a cosmic distancing available mostly to mathematicians and lovers of abstraction.

Einstein's was the first major scientific use of time as an added dimension, though literature had gotten there first. By 1895 the widespread use of dimensional imagery led H.G. Wells to depict time as just another axis of a space-like cosmos, so that one could move forward and back along it. In a sense Wells's use domesticated the fourth dimension, relieving it of genuinely jarring strangeness, and ignoring the possibility of time paradox, too.

Einstein's theory contrasts strongly with visions such as Wells' in *The Time Machine*, which treats motion along the  $(dt)$  axis as very much like taking a train to the future, then back. In Einstein's geometry, only portions of the space can be reached at all without violating causality (the "light cone" within which two points can be connected by a single beam of light). Paradoxes can abound.

Logical twists have inspired many science fiction stories. The issues are quite real; we have no solid theory which includes time in a satisfying manner, along with quantum mechanics, as a truly integrated

fourth dimension. I spent a great deal of space in my novel *Timescape* wrestling with how to make this intuitively clear, but the struggle to think in four dimensions is perhaps beyond realistic fiction; perhaps it is more properly the ground of metaphor.

Physicists began envisioning higher dimensions because they got a simpler dynamic picture, at the price of apparent complication. More dimensions to deal with certainly strains the imagination, and is at first glance an unintuitive way to think. But they can lead to beauties which only a mathematician can love, abstruse elegances. Thus Einstein, in his 1916 theory of general relativity, invoked the simplicity that objects move in "geodesics"—undisturbed paths, the equivalent of a straight line in Euclidean, rectangular geometry, or a great circle on a sphere—in a four-dimensional space-time. The clarity of a single type of curve, in return for the complication of a higher dimension.

Einstein's general relativity said that matter curved the four-dimensional spacetime, an effect we see as gravity. Thus he replaced a classical idea, force, with a modern geometrical view, curvature of a 4D world. This led to a cosmology of the entire universe which was expanding, and therefore pointed implicitly backward to an origin.

Einstein did not in fact like this

feature of his theory, and in his first investigations of his own marvelously beautiful equations fixed up the solution until it was static, without beginning or end. His authority was so profound that his bias might have held for ages, but Edmund Hubble showed within a decade that the universe was expanding.

Even so, the concept of a beginning (and perhaps an end) may be an artifact of our persistent 3D views. Implicitly, space and time separate in the Einstein universe. They are connected, but can be defined as ideas that stand alone.

The essence of talking about dimensions is that they can be separately described. But this may not be so. At least, not in the beginning.

Even Edwin Abbott did not foretell that in the hands of cosmologists like Stephen Hawking and James Hartle, time and space would blend. Though the universe remains 4D, definitions blur.

Following the universe back to its origins leads inevitably to an early instant when intense energies led to the breakdown of the very ideas of space and time. Quantum mechanics tells us that as we proceed to earlier and earlier instants, something peculiar begins to happen. Time begins to turn into space. The origin of everything is in spacetime, and the

"quantum foam" of that primordial event is not separable into our familiar distances and seconds.

What is the shape of this spacetime? Theory permits a promiscuously infinite choice. Our usual view would be that space is one set of coordinates, and time another. But quantum uncertainty erupts through these intuitive definitions.

Begin with an image of a remorselessly shrinking space governed by a backward marching time, like a cone racing downward to a sharp point. Time is the length along the axis, space the circular area of a sidewise slice. Customarily, we think of the apex as the beginning of things, where time starts and space is of zero extent.

Now round off the cone's apex to a curve. There, length and duration smear. This rounded end permits no special time when things began. To see this, imagine the cone tilted. This model universe could be conceptually tilted this way or that, with no unique inclination of the cone seeming to be preferred. Now the "earliest" event is not at the center of the rounded end. It is some spot elsewhere on the rounded nub, a place where space and time blend. No particular spot is special.

Another way to say this is that in 4D, time and space emerge gradually from an earlier essence for which we

have no name. They are ideas we now find quite handy, but they were not forever fundamental.

In the primordial Big Bang, there is no clear boundary between space and time. Rather than an image of an explosion, perhaps we should call this event the Great Emergence. There we are outside the conceptual space of precisely known space and well defined time. Yet there are still only four dimensions—just not sharp ones.

Einstein's cosmology thus begins with a time that is limited in the past, but has no boundary as such. Neither does space. As Stephen Hawking remarked, "The boundary condition of the universe is that it has no boundary."

Perhaps Edwin Abbott would not like the theological ramifications of these ideas. He was of the straitlaced Church of England. (The American version is the Episcopal faith, which happens to be my own. As an boy I was an acolyte, charged with lighting candles and carrying forth the sacraments of holy communion, in red and white robes. The robes were intolerably hot in our Atlanta church, and once I fainted and collapsed in service — overcome by the heat, not the ideas. I'm told it provoked a stir.) However, it is notable that members of that faith had a decided dimen-

sionally imaginative bent, at least in the nineteenth century, Lewis Carroll and H.G. Wells come to mind.

No doubt, psychologically the sharp-cone cosmological picture, with its initial singular point suggests the idea of a unique Creator who sets the whole thing going. How? Physics has no mechanism. For now, it merely describes.

Here lurks a conceptual gap, for we have no model which tells us a mechanism for making universes, much less one in which such basics as space and time are illusions. We need a "God of the gaps" to explain how the original, defining event happened. These new theories seem to bridge this gap in a fashion, but at the price of abandoning still more of our basic intuitions.

Much of God's essence comes from our perceived necessity for a creator, since there was a creation. But if there is no sharp beginning, perhaps we need no sharp, clear creator. Without a singular origin in time, or in space for that matter, is there any need to appeal to a supernatural act of creation?

But does this mean we can regard the universe as entirely self-consistent, its 4D nature emerging with time, from an event which lies a finite time in our past but does not

need any sort of infinite Creator? Can the universe be a closed system, containing the reason for its very existence within itself?

Perhaps — to put it mildly. Theory stands mute. Yet this latest outcome of our wrestling with dimensions assumes that there are laws to this universe, mathematically expressed in a stew of coordinates and algebra and natural beauties.

But whence come the laws themselves? Is that where a Creator resides, making not merely spacetime but the laws? Of this mathematics can say nothing — so far.

Edwin Abbott would no doubt be astonished at the twists and turns his Lewis Carroll-like narrative has taken us to, only a bit more than a century beyond his initial penning of *Flatland*. The questions still loom large.

So such matters progress, sharpening the questions without answering them in final fashion. We can only be sure that the future holds ideas which he, and we, would find stranger still.

Comments (and objections!) to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. Fore-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.



It's been over a year since Ray Aldridge appeared in our pages ("Filter Feeders," January 1994) and that's too long. Ray marks his return to the magazine with a return to *Dilvermoon*, the science fictional world in which he has set many previous stories for F&SF.

The strange habits of the "Spine Divers" inspired the striking cover by Ron Walotsky, whose covers for us have earned him a Hugo nomination.

# The Spine Divers

*By Ray Aldridge*

**S**O HERE I AM, BOUND TO this rock in a grotesquely melodramatic fashion, waiting for the tide. It's rising. Oh, it's rising all right. I can't see the

water moving up the face of the cliff, but the waves below make a different sound as they break, and the sound is closer, more intimate. The sun is going down, the water is coming up.

Occasionally, overwhelmed by panic, I struggle violently against my bonds...to no effect. The knots are impeccable, as one would expect.

I have one minor consolation. My recorders are running, preserving my reactions to this experience. All of my fear, my regret, my anger. The feel of the stone beneath me, the bite of the monofilament at my wrists, my ankles, my throat. The fading flawless sky above, and at the very edge of vision a view of the already-shadowed horizon, the ocean tilting toward me...everything everything, into the recorders, even these pointless thoughts. The little remote camera floats in the air above me, making an external record of my death. Surely my friend and semi-fan Odorini will notify my agent of my

misfortune, and someone will come to remove the recorders from my corpse. The publisher will hire some hack to edit the materials I've gathered on this trip, and my creditors will be happy at last. Odorini will get a special edition, no doubt.

The hack will probably start with this scene, or perhaps a little later, when the waves are wetting my toes and I'm wetting my pants. Then, a flashback to the beginning of the whole sordid business. The story in sequence. A final external shot: my dead stare through the darkening water.

Fade out.

Actually, if my hands were free, I think I'd turn the recorders off.

The bearers carried my palanquin along the crag-top path, bare backs shining with sweat, stinking like genuine savages. Perhaps they were...the agency in Skull had assured me I was getting the Real Experience. But I suspected a degree of stage dressing. For one thing, few indigenes are left along the north Spine these days, and those lucky survivors have for the most part found more profitable and less demanding ways to exhibit themselves. So the sturdy barbarians who bore me south along the Spine were in all likelihood just thin-frame mechs hung with vatted flesh. In times past the Spinners, to discourage this scab labor, would waylay the mech bearers, bash in their brain-boxes, carve the flesh from the frames, and have a big barbecue. A number of stranded tourists had to walk back to Skull and several failed to survive the trek. The tourist agencies retaliated by installing poisonous flesh on the next generation of mechs, which is one reason why so few real Spinners remain in the north.

I shut down my recorders and wiped the past half-hour from memory. This sour cynicism isn't what my subscribers want. Everyone gets enough of that unpleasantness in their ordinary lives. Most of my fans are urban wage-slaves, yearning for vivid experiences in faraway places. And what's wrong with that? Nothing whatever.

After a minute of deep breathing and mind-clearing exercises, I tapped at my forearm dataslate, until a chime signaled that the recorders were reset. I glanced at the remote camera's monitor, a square of light glowing on my wrist. The little camera flew high overhead, recording a long shot of my palanquin jogging down the path. I signaled it to move in closer, and began again.

Autumn on the Spine...certainly there is great beauty here, and of a fairly uncommon sort. We were passing through a maze of carnelian monoliths, fantastically carved by the eons. In places where the agate had worn thin, the long light of the westering sun shone through, rendered blood-red by its passage through the stone. To the right I caught an occasional glimpse of Azure Ocean, placid-seeming from this height. The path was bordered with creeping thyme, the scent of which made an agreeable counterpoint to the earthy odors arising from my bearers.

I turned a determined eye to them. They shouldered the padded poles of my palanquin without noticeable effort, trotting in careful unison, so that my seat swayed in a comfortable and predictable manner. They wore breech-cloths of goatfish leather, beaded with intricate designs: gray, blue, and dusty rose. Their sandals were laced to the knee, the thongs tasseled with thin gold chain, flashing as they moved. On waist straps they carried long slender daggers and short-barreled power guns of an antique design. Their heads were shaven, their skin a brown so dark it displayed a purplish tint.

We passed the last carnelian monolith and the trail rose to the right toward the Spine's crest. At the top of the granite knob, I could look out over both oceans.

"Stop here," I said. I looked east, to the steel-blue deeps of the Stormbringer Sea. A kilometer offshore, a monster was rolling in the trough of the big waves. Its copper-scaled body was larger than the starliner that had brought me to this ocean world. Its great fins glowed like green flames; I could see the amber glitter of its eye-cluster. I felt a bit of the awe that so rarely touches me these days — only a little, but enough that clever editing and enhancement will transmit the feeling to my subscribers, when they relive this moment. There was a time when the awe came easily to me... whenever I visited a strange world, saw a new vista, or met a person from a culture unfamiliar to me. But no more. Now it's something of a struggle to feel anything but fatigue and weary calculation. Is my reaction strong enough, complex enough, sympathetic enough, different enough? And on this trip — which may be the last one for me — I worry that a little desperation will find its way into my work. This one must sell; it must. Another failure will almost certainly end my career, such as it is.

I realized that I had gone astray again and paused the recorders, saving the sea monster segment — not much, but usable.

I was very tired; perhaps that was the difficulty. I decided not to waste any more of the Spine's marvels that day.

"Is this a good camp?" I asked the lead bearer, who called himself Teeg.

"No, offworlder," Teeg said, without turning his head. "Leatherwings hunt the heights after dark. We must go down into the Valley of Shards, or the beasts will carry you away to their nests...tent, foolish mechanisms, soft white person and all. There is shelter in the Valley, and a hot spring to comfort your weak bones." He spoke without turning his head, and I again suspected the agency had given me mechs instead of men. There was something about their insolence, carefully metered...unpleasant enough to make me suppose that I am among surly barbarians, but not vicious enough to deeply offend me. My historical sources describe the real north Spiners as masters of casual invective—*inventive, industrious, and malicious*. But perhaps these particular ones had simply adapted to the tourist trade and were angling for a tip. Or it could have been that my force-leamed fluency in the Spiner language was insufficiently subtle, so that I was unable to appreciate the depth of Teeg's contempt.

I sighed and made another attempt to put my misgivings aside. Here was a fine place to make an opening narrative dump. "Once again," I said.

...while my vision pans across the wild craggy landscape and the two oceans, while my heart fills with the beauty of the scene, with anticipation of the wonders I will see during my journey down the Spine, a resonant thought-stream sets the scene: "The Spine is a tall narrow chain of mountains, formed during a cataclysmic fracture of the underlying planetary crust. Upwelling magma lifted a fantastic variety of ancient rock to the top of the Spine, so that every imaginable landform can be found there. Though less than a kilometer wide in many places, the Spine divides two oceans completely, curving south for 4500 kilometers. Its southern terminus is the icy waste of the polar cap, its northern terminus the small jungle continent of Skull and the city of the same name. But the chief marvel of the Spine is not its unusual geology. Far stranger are the several unique cultures which grew up along the Spine, isolated by the lack of roads, the expense of air freight, and the impossibility of ocean transport."

And here, I realized, would be an excellent place to use the sighting of the sea monster, so I made a note...and then I made a sincere attempt to feel all the things I ought to feel.

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Teeg and his fellow mechs set up camp efficiently. I could not seem to think of them as human, despite my best efforts to believe in them.

The hot spring was in a grotto encrusted with white mineral deposits, very pleasant. Teeg had hung several small oil lamps from the ceiling, so that the grotto glowed with soft yellow light, reflected and multiplied by the crystal efflorescence.

As I eased myself into the spring, which indeed I expected to soothe my aches, Teeg spoke. "Soak to your heart's content, offworlder. We eat at dark, but we will save you the scrapings of our plates."

I nodded affably. This seemed to annoy Teeg, or so I might have thought, had I believed him human. "Enjoy your wallow," he snapped. "At one time, this spring was sacred to the Goddess of Shallow Clams, and no one went shod over its holy ground. Now, flabby offworlders sport in its pure waters, happy as rutting blowfish." He went away.

In the morning we took the trail again. We made camp four more times before we reached the village of the Spine divers. We met no other travelers along the way; the agencies in Skull arranged matters so as to preserve the illusion that the Spine was an empty place — parties on foot were carefully scheduled to avoid overlaps and all return traffic was by flyer. It worked for me. The magic of traveling among wonders had come upon me again, perhaps not so strongly as in the past, but enough that I could begin my work in earnest.

The village, which had no name, lay in the open mouth of a broken cliff, several hundred meters above Stormbringer Sea. My bearers paused at the top of the path that led down into the village, and my recorder lights twinkled.

The houses encrusted the cliffs like barnacles, white sprawls of masonry with black stone roofs. No one moved in the narrow alleys and stairways that separated the houses — the divers are a principally nocturnal people. Also, much of the village's life goes on in the caverns below.

I felt a familiar surge of anticipation, a complex of emotions that even my harshest critics would admit I feel well. Curiosity was a large component, of course. I wondered about the folk of the village — what were their special peculiarities...their dreams, their fears, their expectations? How would I seem to them? What would the local food be like; would I eat it with pleasure

or resignation? Would I meet a special person, someone with whom I might form a bond of actual friendship, through whose eyes I might, to some extent, see the village as the inhabitants saw it? Would I find a lover during my stay? Such a happy circumstance would add to the value of my travelogue — my fans are, like everyone else in the universe, curious about the sexual customs of faraway people.

I refuse, however, to visit brothels in search of merchantable memories — I believe my fans appreciate this small integrity — and besides, sexuality that arises from friendship is almost always more interesting than that which derives from commerce. Love, now...that's another matter entirely; it lies well outside my area of specialization and I have had no familiarity with it. I would hesitate to attempt it, even as an experiment.

All in all, I anticipated adventure of a not too dangerous or strenuous nature. I hoped for some degree of mystery, which the unusual circumstances of the villagers promised. Finally, I felt that small degree of fear that any realistic traveler carries along with the rest of the baggage. I journeyed in a strange land, where it was easy to believe anything might happen, and of course death was almost a cottage industry in the village.

"You will stay at the offworlder's inn, I suppose," said Teeg, with a perfunctory sneer.

"What other lodging is available?" I asked.

He shrugged.

But as we approached the village, after a tense half-hour of jolting down the steep path, a flyer from one of the Skull agencies landed on the inn's roof and belched forth a crowd of weekenders.

I was disappointed, of course. Somewhere along the way, while putting up with the discomforts of traveling the path in the old-fashioned style, I had convinced myself that I was approaching a difficult destination, off the well-beaten tourist routes, a place only the most intrepid might visit. To an extent that was true, of course; probably the weekenders thought themselves intrepid too.

The truth is the village has many visitors. There are the simple tourists, like me, but others come to the village with more complicated agendas.

In any case, by the time we reached the inn, all the rooms were taken, and Teeg smiled.

At first I believed that this was part of the Real Experience the agency had promised, a small difficulty leading to an intriguing resolution.

Teeg initially took the position that having delivered me to the nameless village, his obligation was at an end, but he was suspiciously quick to respond to my threats and entreaties. A real Spiner, so I thought then, would have drawn out his enjoyment of my predicament. Teeg instead offered to find me a room in the house of his demi-uncle, who, so Teeg told me, resided in the village but was neither a diver nor a user of the diver's drug — and so might be considered a reliable person.

I was not entirely reassured, but fortunately, my recorders were running and I got some fairly good material — my initial feeling of annoyance, then the illogical anger of the traveler whose plans have gone astray, and eventually the satisfaction of having coped successfully with misfortune. I noticed an almost pleasurable anxiety associated with my changed circumstances. I now expected discomfort, but also adventure of an unlooked-for variety.

The house was larger than some, also a bit more dilapidated. A crumbling terrace ran the length of the façade. A scattering of wicker chairs held several ancient persons—wrapped in thick robes and gazing fixedly out over Stormbringer Sea — who failed to acknowledge my arrival by so much as a blink.

"Burned-out cases," Teeg said, with his customary sneer. "Uncle collects them, as some might collect rare orchids or the ears of soft white persons."

"A curious hobby," I said cautiously.

Teeg laughed. "Not so curious as yours. I have watched you, straining to feel something, to revive your dead heart."

"It's no hobby." I was a little irritated. What did this unwashed savage know of my craft?

"More unbelievable yet. There exist people so shallow and crippled that they would pay money for your false memories?"

I shook my head; no profit in discussing aesthetic matters with Teeg the Spiner.

He laughed again and led me through a portico into the house.

The uncle seemed a paler, older version of Teeg, but he was as obsequious as any other innkeeper. "Yes, I can suit you very well," he said. "A room in the south wing, the second floor, with a fine view of the Sea and a comfortable bed. You'll like it, I promise, or my name's not Tsaldo Loomp."

I touched his outstretched hand in greeting. "And your name is...?"

He looked mystified for a moment, and then giggled. "Tsaldo Loomp. At your service. And your name, sir?"

"Michael Mastine."

"We are honored, Citizen Mastine," he said, with only a trace of irony.

Teeg and one of his henchmen carried my baggage up to the room. I trailed after, trying for a strong impression of the house, where perhaps interesting events would occur. The walls were white plaster, stained with age. At intervals hung little dark portraits of dead Spinners, and also a few trophies, the so-called "rainbow rippers" that the divers hunt. These were large, slim-bodied fish striped with once-glorious color, their long razor-edged fins stiffened forever in poses of contrived fury. Their eyes were huge, adapted to the darkness of deep water—the reason why they only entered the tidal caverns at night. They were all at least two meters long, some much larger, and I could see that such a creature might be a formidable quarry for a solitary diver.

The house was quiet, a little musty, and cool...it gave an impression of interesting secrets, of an unseen inner life. I began to think that perhaps I had been fortunate.

Following Teeg down the hall toward my room, I saw the woman come toward us. The bearers pressed close to the wall, their eyes cast down in sudden deference. She glanced directly at me for a moment, as she brushed past, and I felt a touch of the same distant awe that the sea monster had aroused in me. She was dark, and brilliant with unconventional beauty...she was more than a little frightening. She wore the same beaded breechcloth that Teeg wore, her naked torso was smoothly muscled and where she was unscarred, her skin had a dense lustrous polish. One breast was perfect, the other's shape was marred slightly by an indented slash just above the magenta nipple. Her face was unmarked except for a pink seam along her jaw. Her mouth was thin and tense, her eyes huge and of a pale shocking gray. Her black hair was hacked short, without style.

I had to resist the urge to turn and look after her. I was suddenly glad that the offworlders' inn was full.

My room was adequate, if primitive: an iron bed, a wardrobe, a wash-stand, a high-backed chair, a rickety balcony overlooking one of the village's wider alleys and as promised, a fine view of the Sea.

I was sure Teeg was a man only after he was gone. He piled my luggage in the center of the room, then turned to go. I felt a certain distress at his unceremonious attitude; had we not shared the rigors of the trail for five days? I took out a clip of valuta coupons, attempted to give him a small gratuity. He took the coupons and gave me a long chilly look. Then he spat juicily on them, dropped them with a flourish, and went away, knee chains flickering brightly.

**L**EFT MY room as the sun settled to the Azure Ocean, looking for dinner and a sense of the place. Tsaldo Loomp wheeled one of his ancients in as I went out; the innkeeper nodded, the ancient stared intently at nothing.

The alleys were filling with shadow and occasional strollers, mostly offworld folk from the tourist flyer. These were a varied lot, from a half-dozen worlds, mostly couples and triads, apparently out for a romantic weekend in exotic surroundings. Their loud voices rubbed uncomfortably at my nerves. I found myself unreasonably irritated. *Tourists*, I thought peevishly, forgetting that I was only a tourist myself. I suppose this bit of self-deception is an essential tool of the serious traveler.

I was hungry, after nearly five days of Teeg's spartan cuisine — mostly freeze-dried stews and hard biscuits, edible but bland. I paused my recorders and cued my guidebook — by the obscure Hiepter Gant Jr., published almost a hundred years ago, but the only one available. I scanned the restaurant entries, which were few, and settled on a place Gant described thusly: "reeking with history and garlic, the Ripper Room has been under the same ownership for centuries, a rarity in a place where lives are generally short and full of distraction."

A map appeared on my wrist and I memorized it before reactivating my recorders.

The directions led me into the congested heart of the village, where the white masonry houses crowded together and the alleys were so narrow and dark that streetlights burned already. I passed several entrances to the caverns, black mouths exhaling a cold bitter breath. Rusty bars blocked the entrances and signs warned: *TOURISTS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN, Unless Accompanied by a Certified Guide.*

Somewhat to my surprise I found the Ripper Room still in business, and pushed through the door into a cheerful scene. A large low-ceilinged room

held several dozen tables. On the whitewashed walls were enough lamps to make the rooms bright, and the floor was of clean polished flagstone. Though the hour was early for dinner, customers occupied most of the tables. Most were outsiders, but there were a fair number of Spinners present — in fact I thought to recognize Teeg and his henchmen, freshly bathed and wearing pangalac unisuits, but when next I looked he was gone. Waiters trotted back and forth bearing trays of steaming food. I sniffed, detecting the waft of garlic and other savories, but if the odor of history was present it was too subtle for me. No stuffed fish decorated the walls, a point in the establishment's favor.

A small old man came up to me, hairy eyebrows raised. "Will you dine with us, Citizen?" His features were sharp, his black eyes glittering with energetic curiosity. His hair was a glossy white pelt, which gave him an animal quality.

"I hope to," I said.

"Come with me."

He led me to a table in the corner, well away from the kitchen door. "Is this satisfactory, Citizen?"

"Fine."

"The table has a touchscreen, a menu from which you may choose. Today's special is a generous portion of fettuccine dressed with clams and sweet peppers, in a white sauce with cheese. I recommend it highly."

"Thank you," I said.

He bowed quite gracefully. "I am Odorini, the proprietor. Call me, should you have any questions or difficulties." He glanced at my forearm dataslate, and then at the little remote camera, which had followed me inside and now hovered above us. These accessories are commonly used by tourists; in fact several other remotes hung beneath the Ripper's Room ceiling, storing up memories for their owners. But it was apparent to me that Odorini somehow recognized the quality of my devices, and understood that I was more than a casual traveler. "I leave you to enjoy your meal, then," he said, and went back to his desk beside the entrance.

The fettuccine was excellent, as was the pale green wine, the antipasto, the rumcake, the coffee, the brandy. Clearly the Ripper Room did not specialize in the cuisine of the region, but that might prove to be a mercy later in my visit. I drank a toast to Hiepter Gant Jr., wherever he was. I felt a good deal more cheerful than I had an hour before; I felt ready to explore the village.

When I stopped to pay my bill, Odorini accepted my valuta and spoke in his careful manner. "Was your meal acceptable?"

"Completely," I answered.

"I am pleased."

I had the notion that he wanted to say more, so I lingered a moment beside the desk.

He hesitated, as if weighing the propriety of the situation. "You are Michael Mastine, the travelogulist?"

I was astonished. "You know my work?"

"Yes, indeed. I own several of your chips. 'Life among the Treemen of the Brontoi Archipelago.' 'Nude Rafting on the Speite,' and, of course, your classic, 'Down the Gravity Beam to the Core.'"

The universe is sometimes a bizarrely small place. "I didn't choose the titles," I said.

"I thought as much," he said. "Well, should you require any assistance, or advice, or even a guide to the caverns — I am certified by the diver's association — don't hesitate to ask. I would be pleased to help."

"You're very kind," I said.

"Not at all." He walked me to the door. "Take care," he said, as I left the Ripper Room.

Outside night had come to the village, and lights burned in all the alleys. More people were out now, some of them divers, I supposed, or at least they seemed to have the look of Spinners — dark, remote, dressed in barbaric simplicity. None gave me more than a passing glance. I wondered where they were going, what they planned.

Once, out of curiosity, I followed a scarred young man through several twists and turns, until he suddenly turned and hissed at me, knife in hand. I raised my empty hands peacefully, stepped back. He made a warning gesture with his knife, and sidled away into the darkness.

I wandered about, passing the doors of several bars and drug emporia, the occasional souvenir shop, a whorehouse, a self-service hospital. Most numerous were the various suicide parlors, though these seemed less than prosperous and I saw no customers waiting. Many houses were silent and empty, as if the village had at one time supported a larger population. But from behind some of the doors and courtyard gates came the sound of laughter and music

and the clink of glasses. I began to feel a certain lonely melancholy. No one here knew me, except for Odorini the restaurateur. No one would invite me to their parties. As was my invariable custom, I carried no letters of introduction; as much as possible I tried to travel as an ordinary tourist.

At the south edge of the village a broken stairway led up to a terrace. I climbed it in the light of the huge rising moon, which seemed to fill half of the eastern horizon, though it was a few days past full.

Several iron benches at the terrace's edge overlooked the village, and I sat, a little tired. After positioning the remote camera to record my silhouette against the moon, I considered my next move. The village was a closed society, not particularly interesting in itself. The architecture was no different from that of a million other stony places. Some of the people were picturesque — good for a minute or two on the finished chip.

I tried to remember why I had thought the village such a sure thing.

Oh yes, I thought. The divers and their drug.

I learned about the divers and their drug from my agent, Dalrimple Cleame.

"You're broke," he told me one day.

"Really," I said weakly.

"Really. But I can get you one more shot, if you have the gonads to try again."

"Details?" I asked, with justifiable suspicion.

"Marginal publisher...an outfit called Remembrances Inc., chartered out of Firenza. Ever heard of it? Me neither. Chintzy expense account, small advance, limited distribution. But it'll keep you in the biz, and who knows? Might do well enough to bring you back from the dead. Stranger things have happened."

"Where?" I had been in a monosyllabic mood for months.

"A planet called Raarea. A village where they do something very dangerous; they swim alone through tidal caverns, hunting a big mean fish. They use a speargun."

"Why?"

"They extract a drug from the big mean fish. Now get this: it's a no-fear drug. When you're on it, you aren't afraid of anything. Just what you need, Michael."

"Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. And picture this: some of these divers, who swim through these black caverns, carried by vicious tides from one ocean to another, flying under mountains in the darkness, chasing a creature that would just love to cut them to small scraps...some of them, they don't even use the drug."

A synthetic version of the drug is available on Dilvermoon. It causes a sort of mentational leprosy in its addicts — fear, after all, is a necessary thing. Without fear, we avoid much of the pain of the psychic injuries we receive, and parts of our hearts rot away unnoticed.

But it must be different, here in the village. Or perhaps not; many folk come here to buy the courage to leave their lives, or for other, less-understandable purposes.

I heard a footfall, close behind me. I turned quickly and jumped up, afraid that some criminal was stalking me, but it was the woman I had seen at the house, her identity plain in the moonlight. Her expression was less readable. Curiosity? Annoyance? I couldn't tell.

Against the evening chill, she wore a white shirt, unbuttoned to the waist.

"Hello," she said, in a low soft voice, an incongruously sweet voice.

"Hello," I answered.

"Don't be afraid," she said, as she came up to me.

"I'm not," I said, in somewhat hollow tones.

She smiled and stood too close to me. "You're not? Odorini said you were a man who was afraid of everything." She seemed to realize that this might not be a very friendly conversational gambit. "Of course, he doesn't mean that in a *bad* way."

My recorders were still running; I hardly thought of them. "You're a friend of his?"

She shrugged. "He told me to look for you here."

I became aware of her perfume, a light scent, reminiscent of fresh-cut hay and flowers — an odd scent in this stony seascape.

"Do you generally do what Odorini tells you to do?"

"He's my father, or so I'm told. I give him respect. Besides, he said I might find you interesting. And that you would definitely find *me* interesting."

I'd run out of things to say. She came even closer, so that I could almost feel the warmth of her body. She was almost exactly my height; her eyes were inches from mine when she spoke again.

"Does this seem ugly to you?" She looked down and traced with her finger the scar across her breast.

"No," I said, a bit breathlessly. I was by now quite frightened. The encounter had taken on an erotic menace for which I was completely unprepared. What was going on? Who was this woman? Who was Odorini and what was he up to?

"Am I beautiful to you, then?"

Her eyes had a strange blind glitter. I wondered if she were under the influence of the drug.

"Yes," I answered. "Of course."

She smiled, for the first time, and it was an expression as soft and sweet and surprising as her voice. "I'm a diver," she said. "Odorini said you would be more interested in *that* than in my beauty."

"You're a diver? Really?"

The smile faded. "Yes, yes. So what? Here there are many divers, but only one Mirella."

"That is your name? Mirella?"

"My name, yes." Now she seemed impatient. "Come. We will go back to Loomp's house and talk, or fuck. Whatever you want."

I drew back slightly, an involuntary gesture of fright, and she made a sound of exasperation. "You are far too slow for me," she said, and went away, walking fast.

When I returned, the house was silent and dark, and I found my way to my room with the aid of my remote's camera lights.

I took breakfast at the Ripper Room, of course; curiosity and paranoia demanded I immediately interview Odorini. Unfortunately, he wasn't there when I arrived.

When I came to pay my bill, Odorini had appeared, looking bright-eyed and respectful. I was disarmed, and unsure of how to proceed.

Finally I ventured a remark. "I think I met your daughter last night."

He raised his hairy eyebrows in mild inquiry. "Ah. Mirella, you mean?"

"You have other daughters?"

"Many," he said modestly. "Sons, too."

He seemed polite and receptive, but not particularly eager for conversation. I tried again. "She said you wanted her to seek me out. May I ask why?"

He shrugged, but not at all insolently. "I thought you might find her unusual. And of course I wanted her to have an opportunity to meet a well-known artist from the larger universe. The village is such a small world, you see."

"I suppose," I said. "She told me she was a diver."

"Yes. That is so." Odorini looked quite sad, suddenly.

"You don't approve?"

Another shrug, a sorrowing gesture. "The divers...they all die young. What can I say? Hers is a glorious profession, of course, but...she is a sweet child; one's children should live forever, no?"

A silence passed, while I struggled to think of something to say. The recorders were running, though today Odorini seemed to take no notice of my remote camera, which hovered slightly to the side, automatically recording shots of each speaker in turn. It occurred to me that an interesting story was rising from the anonymity of the village.

If only I could find the wit to draw it forth, my professional difficulties might be over.

"Well," I said. "You mentioned that you might be available. To guide me into the caverns?"

"Yes, of course." He brightened a bit. "You could watch the divers make their leap, or if you prefer, we could go to the Well of Rebirth, to see the survivors emerge with their trophies. The hunting tide runs tonight."

"I knew," I said, my arrival had been planned to coincide with a hunting tide, as there are only three suitable tides per week, on average. "Does Mirella hunt tonight?"

For an instant Odorini's direct gaze seemed tinged with dislike, but perhaps I was mistaken. "No, no. Not tonight. She is still recovering from injuries...on her last hunt, a fish cut her badly. But soon enough she will be ready."

"I see," I said.

Odorini waited, once again an avatar of self-possession, sharp old face pleasantly blank.

"Well, then, tonight. Perhaps the Well?" I said.

He bowed. "Meet me here an hour past sunset. If that is convenient."

**T**HE DAY passed without profit. I took a steep path down to the Azure Ocean, where I found a small stony beach, littered with sunbathing offworlders. A swimming area had been set up, protected from hungry sea monsters by a charged mesh, but the murky water tempted me not at all. At the far end of the strand were a cluster of so-called "suicide rocks," where for a small fee a customer might be clamped, there to await the inrushing tide. It seemed to me an eccentric approach to self-termination, but perhaps some folk saw a certain majesty in it — death by inexorable natural forces.

I bought a sticky rum drink at a rock-slab cabana, rented a lounge chair, and joined the other tourists for a while.

I looked down the beach, trying to think of some useful work I might do in the village, before dark and the descent into the caverns — but without success. My mind seemed heavy and dull, and I could only hope that my imagination was still functioning, somewhere below the conscious level. I noticed again that many of the offworlders carried recording gear, some of it of professional quality. As I watched the tiny cameras hovering over their owners, an unpleasant image came to me: the cameras looked a little like flies attracted to some offal washed up on the sand. The odor of rotting seaweed contributed a degree of authenticity to this unfortunate perception.

No other colorful metaphors occurred to me and I quickly grew bored. I gulped down my drink and made to rise.

"Hello," said someone, in the Dilvermoon trade patois, my native tongue. I turned, to see a smiling tourist approaching me. She wore a fashionable bathing sash about her narrow waist. She was tall and wore her long red hair in a knot of braids. All of her body hair had been replaced with stylized tattoos, so that from a distance red curls seemed to flow up her belly in languid chevrons. Though a trifle over-voluptuous for my taste, she possessed the physical perfection available to any Dilvermooner of means. Two external cameras orbited her and she had a forearm dataslate identical to mine, except that it was new. She wanted to compare equipment. We exchanged names. She was a beginner, but fairly knowledgeable and apparently wealthy enough to start with quality gear. We discussed her setup, and then I let it slip that I was a professional.

She became vivacious. "Tell me about your work, please."

"Well....I travel about to unusual places...like this. Then I try to see with clear eyes. Then I spend a lot of time in the studio, trying to put together a true picture of what I've seen."

"Do you publish under your own name?"

I sighed. "Yes. But there's no particular reason for you to have heard of me. I'm obscure. Or, as I like to think of it, I have a small but select audience."

"Oh," she said. "That sounds nice. I'll have to look for your chips when I get home. But...well, do you think there's still a market for, you know, the plain old travelogue? One of my husbands is a factor for one of the Bo'eme clearing houses, and he says the vogue of the one-person production is over. Dead and gone. He says people want epics these days. Casts of thousands. Multi-track memories. Grand dramas, tight plotting, life-or-death situations."

"He may be right," I said, a little stiffly. She was articulating my worst fear. "But some still appreciate the subtleties of a simple, deep, *personal* experience. I hope so, anyway."

"I'm sure you know more about it than he does," she said consolingly, and wandered away.

When she was gone, I felt drowned in desperation and lethargy.

At length the siren sounded and we all got up to go. Offshore, the Azure Ocean began to boil as the tide poured from crevices below. I felt a subtle trembling in the stones beneath my feet — the transmitted violence of the tide as it broke against the other side of the Spine. Metal doors slid up to seal off the rock-slab cabana. The man who rented the lounge chairs went around collecting them, and he started up the cliff trail with several dozen nested on his back.

The rest of us followed immediately, except for a group down by the suicide rocks. A woman was apparently awaiting the tide, surrounded by her family — or perhaps just a gaggle of morbid tourists, all of whom had emotigogue recorders and free-flying cameras. The woman had a tired, rather pleasant face. She didn't seem at all anxious; probably she'd bought a sample of the drug in the village. The metal bands that held her wrists and ankles sparkled in the westering sun.

I knew I ought to go down and make a record of this defining event —

suicide was a major industry in the village, as one might expect. But for some reason I couldn't bring myself to do so.

I left the other tourists to watch the tide climb the Heights and went in search of lunch. I found a clean-looking basement café down a narrow alley; it advertised "genuine Northern Spine cuisine." This consisted of a variety of fish and mollusks — pickled, smoked, dried — as well as several kinds of weedy vegetables, accompanied by a gray crumbly algae-based bread. I'd had much worse, and I tried to keep an open mind. My fans deserve that consideration. The strong greasy flavors that lay so heavily on my palate might well seem marvelous to some. Of course, these days most playback consoles allow their users to isolate a single sensory track — taste, for instance — and suppress any unwanted tracks. So my fans will not be entirely at the mercy of my unappreciative thoughts.

After lunch I went back to my room to do a little editing.

I carry a large folding flatscreen monitor on all my trips. It's not holographic. Human vision isn't holographic...that's my reasoning. Even though my little remote records a partially holographic image, via radar-ranging, I don't use that capability in my finished chips. I don't want that jarring textural contrast between the images recorded from my optic nerve and images recorded by the camera, so I flatten the camera's input into an ordinary stereo image. Besides, there's nothing more annoying to an artist than to see people walking around their holocubes, peering into the corners, looking for the little details the artist didn't want them to notice. People enjoy doing that, but so what? With my stuff, they have to be content to see what I see. I only use external images when necessary for clarity. A critic said of my last chip "...clings with tiny weak claws to his outmoded technique, attempts to conceal his limitations beneath a false and labored simplicity." I'm not fashionable, I know — that's one reason for my declining popularity, so my agent Dalrimple Cleame tells me.

I shut down my recorders and unfolded the big monitor.

For a while I just flipped between tracks, getting a sense of the material, trying to slip into that strange double-minded state that I must adopt in order to work with my own memories. Not everyone can relive an experience while simultaneously retaining a useful awareness of the here and now. It's like a disorienting drug, that mental state, a kind of purposeful delirium. It's like

dreaming, except that one's recorded memories are far more vivid and concrete than any dream and they can easily overwhelm an unpracticed person. In fact, some must resort to filters which scale back the intensity of the recorded experience. But I've been doing this for a very long time now. My consciousness easily splits into the two streams that the work demands.

It struck me that so far the unifying emotional coloration in these segments seemed to be desperation. In a moment of whimsy, I said, "Begin at the beginning, from the outside in."

I set up an experimental track and I ran the call from my agent.

I've never given up; here was the evidence — an external shot of me, wearing a dirty pair of shorts, gray-fleshed and unbarbered, hunched over the viewscreen of my phone. Except when I'm editing past experiences and don't want to risk a possibly fatal experiential heterodyne, I always keep the recorders running; that's why I can claim I've never given up. I watched my slightly younger self have his guarded conversation with Cleame, noticed for the millionth time what a small and unexceptional-looking man I am. My hair is black and straight, and when I'm well-groomed it lies close to my skull. My face is faintly predatory, with hooded blue eyes set deep below high-arched brows. My mouth sometimes has a malicious curve. My hands are long and bony, and despite Teeg's remarks about "soft white persons," my musculature is well-developed and I am strong for my size.

I dissolved the long shot, moved inside, let the desperation and reluctant hope emerge clearly from the emotional mix.

Then I made a clean jump-cut to the trail that first day....

When I grew tired, I realized that with this tentative track I had made a major departure from my past work. Always before, I tried to be, as best I could, a blank tablet, an empty skin. Such neutrality in an emotigogue recording is, I've always believed, essential. And my agent and editors had always reminded me of one of the industry's primary taboos: *don't make memories about remembering.* "Until you get to be a mega-star," Cleame told me one day, "nobody's going to give a damn about your working methods or esthetic philosophies or artistic angst. Remember this."

Now I was allowing my personal concerns to seep into every sequence, so that the work had become a story about me, and not about the nameless village and its dwellers.

I was disturbed and frustrated, but for some reason, I preserved the track.

Maybe change was necessary, maybe I was wrong about what my fans wanted, or perhaps the thing they wanted had changed.

I met Odorini at the appointed time. The restaurateur wore a dark cloak, the hood pulled close around his face. He looked a bit sinister in the dim lamplight.

He glanced at my feet. "You're wearing sensible shoes, I see. Very good. Shall we go?"

He took me to the nearest cave mouth and pressed his palm to the identiplate. A chime rang out and then the iron gate swung back, making a rusty screech. It was all very atmospheric. Odorini played to this effect shamelessly. He turned and beckoned me in, staring wide-eyed. "Come with me...down, down, down into the darkness," he said, and then cackled wildly.

As we went inside the cave, automatic lights came on, to reveal an artificially smooth walkway. Odorini nudged me with his elbow. "How was I?" he asked.

"Too much," I answered. "I'll have to cut you from this segment."

He took this with good humor. "I imagine you're right. I'm not made for melodrama. My face is too serious."

I began to think I'd made a mistake in hiring Odorini. His constant awareness of my purposes was distracting.

"Listen," I said. "Would you do me a favor, would you pretend you don't know me? Pretend I'm just another tourist."

He looked abruptly solemn. "Of course. I should have known better."

As we went deeper into the caverns, I realized that the primitive village above was only a consciously quaint façade. The cavern was thoroughly modernized—well-lit, with cushioned walkways and steel railings. At some junctions were small automated kiosks, where directions could be obtained, as well as hot drinks and snacks.

"You're surprised?" Odorini asked.

"Well, yes," I said. "My room has a washbasin. The bathroom's down the hall."

He laughed. "We're a tourist attraction. Didn't your agency in Skull promise you The Real Experience? Most visitors are content with that; we take them down to the Well of Rebirth by a different path. The stone sweats, torches flare, eerie music plays. You see?"

"Oh."

"But you should know the truth about us. Do you know why the village has no name? Because the Tourist Development Council can't seem to come up with a name that pleases everyone. We'd have a name if we could; can you imagine how difficult it is to advertise a nameless place?"

I was very uncomfortable with this conversation; my prospects for making a successful travelogue, at least in the customary mode, seemed to be fading. To some extent, all tourist destinations are falsifications, but tourists don't like to be reminded of this fact. "You make it sound trivial."

"No, no. I don't mean to." His sharp old face grew dark and sad. "There's nothing trivial about the divers. And they are the heart of the matter; all our prosperity springs from them and the drug. Our industry is based on fear, and fear is never trivial."

As he spoke, he led me into a side corridor, where a residential level began. Here were large open areas carved from the limestone and occupied by a surprising crowd.

We walked slowly, as Odorini dispensed a running commentary.

Two naked men fought with iron gloves in a sunken arena. They circled cautiously, parried each other's blows in a shower of yellow sparks. "Gladiators from the Silvermoon blood stadia. They come here to learn to control their fear," Odorini said. "They start with a trace of the drug and increase the dosage until the fear is manageable. Trainable. In the same vein, we minister to the devotees of other dangerous sports, to soldiers, to doctors, to artists."

"Artists?"

Odorini gave me a faintly malicious smile. "Artists, yes. They're the most numerous group among the dwellers below. Are not all good artists familiar with fear and its destructive effects?"

And indeed the next open space was some sort of atelier, where men and women worked at various crafts. Potters sweated over wheels, painters stood at easels, glass-blowers squinted into the glare of the furnaces. A woman at a huge clattering loom threw her shuttle back and forth with manic intensity, and cursed in a low fierce voice.

"You deny this?" Odorini asked.

I shrugged.

His smile grew less amiable. "Consider. What would an artist not fear? So many things to fear: critics, poverty, drudgery, and boredom. And the

greatest fear of all...that one is untalented and therefore wasting one's life in a futile pursuit. I would think that every artist, no matter how successful, suffers from this fear at times, except for those with truly monstrous and crippling egos."

"I guess so," I said in a hollow voice, feeling attacked.

He glanced at me with a suddenly compassionate expression. "I had supposed that you came here to deal with some fear of your own. Was I incorrect?"

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't think so, when I planned this trip."

"Ah," he said, with no trace of skepticism. "It's as well, Michael. You know, there are very few similarities between lack of fear, and courage."

**W**E PASSED A room of hard-faced men and women, jerking and straining at the straps of emotigogue chairs, eyes rolled back into their heads.

"Soldiers," Odorini said. "They relive old battles, to learn what they might have done, with less fear."

Next was a room of dancers, then a room of singers in audio isolation booths, then a room of gravsled jockeys in simulators. I stopped looking; the thought of all that fear was making me dizzy and a little ill.

Odorini seemed to sense my discomfort. "Come, we'll see something rarely seen by tourists." He led me through a steel pressure door, marked *Essential Personnel Only*.

We walked along an artificial corridor. At several junctures, gates closed off the corridor. At each we were asked for identification, by guards wearing the uniform of a Dilvermoon security agency.

At the last gate we were both searched, thoroughly and impersonally. At first the guards demanded that I remove my recorders, but Odorini produced a document granting me special permission.

"He's no spy," said Odorini jovially to the guards. "Believe me, he doesn't know what to look for."

I felt vaguely insulted.

"We still have a few secrets," Odorini said. "The synthetic drug is, according to connoisseurs, inferior to our product, though some say this is sheer mysticism. Also our process is cheaper, once we have the fish. On Dilvermoon they must use sub-molecular assemblers of great sophistication, Very costly."

"What do you use?"

Odorini rolled his eyes wildly, falling back into his role as infernal guide. "The toenails of executed felons. Essence of black pearl. The milk of virgins."

"The milk of virgins?"

He shrugged. "Have you never heard of hormone therapy? Our alchemists are state-of-the-art."

I laughed; Odorini was an entertaining companion.

We passed through a portal into the laboratories, which exactly resembled every other industrial laboratory I had ever seen, except for the faint but pervasive stink of fish. White-coated technicians tended rows of gleaming machines, and in one corner was a dissection station.

"Look at this," he said, taking me to a trough on which a rainbow ripper lay, its colors subdued by death. "A fine specimen, eh?"

"I suppose." The fish gave off a chill; evidently it had just been removed from refrigeration. I reached out to touch one of its fins, and cut my finger deeply enough to bleed a little.

Odorini gave me a clean cloth to wrap around the finger. "Dangerous creature, even frozen," he said.

My annoyance surfaced again. Odorini was an intelligent man; why had he brought me here? "I don't believe my fans will be very interested in the mechanics of the process," I said, somewhat sourly.

Odorini assumed an expression of contrition, which might even have been genuine. "Sorry," he said. "But I'm striving for balance in my presentation. I just want you to always keep in mind that despite the splendor and bravery of the divers, the stirring ceremonies, the glorious deeds and noble stories...the final result is nothing but a big dead fish."

"You're making editorial suggestions?"

He smiled and said nothing.

A technician began to carve up the fish as we left.

When we joined the ordinary tourist route down to the Well, I saw that Odorini had described it accurately. The dank walls compressed my spirits. I felt the weight of the Spine poised above me, ready to crush. The torches gave off a dense smoke, so that visibility was limited to a few yards. The eerie music Odorini had mentioned was thoroughly eerie.

The whole thing reminded me of a particularly well-designed amusement park.

Eventually we came to a wide corridor, where the ceiling lifted away and a number of other tourists and their guides waited. A long window was set into one side of this gallery. Odorini led me to it.

Below was a great natural cavern, converted into a barbaric and sumptuous banquet hall. Gas flares shed a harsh brilliant light on hundreds of divers, who sat at tables and lolled on couches. Servants scurried back and forth, carrying platters of food and drink.

"The Hall of the Tides," said Odorini. "Where the divers who do not swim this night go to console themselves with various pleasures. Where new divers are made."

I saw what he meant; here and there men and women were copulating, some in shadowy alcoves at the back of the hall, a few on the tables, surrounded by approving spectators. It was a scene from a somewhat decadent medievalist romance, and I was amused.

My smile faded a bit when I saw Mirella at a table almost directly below the observation window. She leaned against a large slab-chested man, peeling a pale gold pear with a silver knife. She still wore the loose white shirt, but she was otherwise naked, her breechcloth tossed carelessly aside. The implications of this came slowly to me, and for some illogical reason I felt a sense of loss. Her legs were long, smooth, and powerful-looking — very beautiful. Her expression seemed less intense now, her lips were glossy with pear juice.

I turned away, to see Odorini looking down at his child. His old face, full of wistful affection, was very sad.

"Was Mirella made here?" I asked.

"Oh no," he said. "Not in the way you mean. Only divers and their indentured servants are allowed within the Hall."

I looked about at the avid-faced tourists, who were making rude remarks and pointing. "They don't mind being watched?"

He shrugged. "Do you mind your spectators? Many more watch you as you go about your travels. And peer forth from your eyes, feel with your heart...a more intimate sort of voyeurism than this," he said, waving at the tourists above, the revellers below.

"It's not the same," I said. "My experiences are carefully edited. My purposes are different."

Odorini spoke with mild contempt, or so I imagined. "Because you're

making art? The divers make art of their lives, or so they believe." His smile settled into an ironic crook. "We all must cling to our illusions, not so? Or sink."

I returned my attention to the Hall of Tides. Somehow I'd lost track of my purpose in coming here, of my work. Somehow I'd become involved with Odorini's agenda...whatever that might turn out to be. It was unacceptable. Unacceptable.

A man in a long black robe and a tall red hat came into the Hall and banged a staff against the floor. "The tide wizard," Odorini said. "He notifies the celebrants that divers are due in the Well."

Immediately there was an exodus from the Hall; even the most energetically engaged couples separated. The divers in general revealed no irritation at this interruption, but Mirella was an exception. She pouted at the large man, who was already halfway to the portal at the Hall's far end.

"She is so young," Odorini said, almost whispering. Then, in a stronger voice: "Hurry! It's time."

In a crowd of eager offworlders, we made our way along another crooked passage to the Well of Rebirth.

The Well was a natural amphitheater perhaps 150 meters wide, now flooded by the tide to a depth of fifty meters. A series of ledges ringed the Well, the lowest thronged with divers, who had by now assembled. We tourists were permitted to watch from the highest ledge, several stories above the Well's surface.

In the torchlight, the water in the Well was a murky indigo, boiling with random currents. I tried to imagine swimming in the black depths below...but even the thought made me feel a degree of panic.

"Watch, now," Odorini said.

The first diver burst the surface in a cloud of spray. He sank back and began to swim for the ledge. His maneuvering lights, a dozen metallic ovoids glowing blue-white, followed him like a school of obedient fish.

He pulled himself halfway from the water and lay gasping. No one helped him.

"He failed to kill," Odorini said by way of explanation.

After a minute, the unlucky diver got to his feet. He unstrapped his breathing apparatus, gathered his lights into a net bag, and staggered away.

Two more unsuccessful divers emerged, to be greeted by the same silent contempt. This struck me as a harsh custom and I said as much to Odorini.

"Yes, I think so too," he said. "But here is the rationale: divers who suffer their fellows' scorn too often will be forced to pursue the fish more recklessly, in which case they either kill successfully or die gloriously. Do you see the logic?"

I didn't have a reply. Below, the first successful diver appeared, clinging weakly to a line. She triggered an inflatable buoy attached to her breather harness, and then seemed to lose consciousness. Several of the waiting divers dove into the Well, and brought her and her line to the ledge. Many hands lifted her from the water, and heaved in her prize, a ripper not quite dead, making feeble attempts to shake loose the harpoon which impaled its flank.

The large man I had seen with Mirella tapped the fish's head with a stun stick and it went rigid. A half-dozen divers dragged it from the water, fastened a block-and-tackle to its tail, and hauled it up to hang from a nearby gallows, where its quivering soon ceased.

Another fish was landed, another failure was scorned. Then a diver rose into the Well with the corpse of a casualty. He cradled the body gently, held it up and spun in a slow circle, as if displaying the victim to all the watchers. The dead diver had been a woman with a hard handsome face, and when her diving hood was pulled away, long bright hair spilled into the water. When the others lifted the body gently to the ledge, the extent of the damage became clear. The fish had taken one leg to the hip, both arms to the elbow, and had opened the abdomen almost to the spine.

Apparently this was what the other tourists had come to see. They whispered and giggled beside me, and I felt a shudder of disgust work through me.

"Let's go," I said to Odorini. He made no answer, and when I turned to him, I saw that he was crying silently.

The Ripper Room was closed when we regained the surface, but Odorini took me to a back room, and from a dusty bottle poured us each a glass of red wine. We sat at a small round table, in an uneasy silence. I surreptitiously examined the scene through my forearm monitor, and cheated a bit to my left, so as to paint my face with a flattering shadow.

Finally I asked him, "What are you doing, Odorini? It's more than common helpfulness, isn't it?"

He smiled a wounded smile. "Ah, you've found me out. You're too acute a student of humanity."

"Don't mock me," I said. "This may be a joke to you, but it's my life."

"I'm not mocking," he said with irresistible sincerity. "Well, it's nothing very sinister. My daughter, Mirella...did you know she was once my life's light? Such a sweet little girl there never was before, will never be again. It seems just yesterday that she sat on my knee, telling me that she would be a diver when she grew up."

His face slackened, and his eyes were dull with an inward gaze.

"And now she is a diver," I said, in an attempt to move the conversation along.

He shivered. "Yes. She realized her dream. But soon she will die, and what will I have left? Only those few poor memories of her that my ancient head can hold."

The truth dawned on me. "You want me to include her in my travelogue?"

"Yes, and why not? she is worthy of your regard, not so?"

"Yes, she is," I said quickly. "But why don't you make your own recordings? The equipment is available here; I've seen tourists with rented gear."

He shrugged. "I suppose I could. But I like your work; you're an artist with memory, as I am an artist with food. You could, so I presume, eat your own cooking without great harm...but wouldn't you rather eat mine? It is the same with memory. Your chips are small in scope, perhaps, but somehow complete, and they have...how shall I say this? Innocence is the right word, perhaps." He paused. "Mirella is an innocent."

"Really?"

He saw my skepticism. "She is. Oh, she has rough edges, I admit this, but she is young, you see."

"I see."

"Not entirely," he said. "You are very young, for a Dilvermooner; what are you, seventy standard years? Eighty? I myself am old in every sense; I was old when I came to this terrible little place. Four hundred years ago. But Mirella is young in the most basic human sense; she was born barely twenty-three years ago. She won't see her twenty-fourth birthday."

I examined the emotions that swam through my head, which was aching a little with fatigue. I felt a natural compassion for Odorini, tinged with a

slight degree of suspicion. Was he only a doting father, nothing more? That he knew of me was in itself an extravagant coincidence, given the size of the universe and the depth of my obscurity. On the other hand, I had chosen his restaurant from an old guide book — a true coincidence, which probably could not have been pre-arranged.

What of my feelings regarding the village, the divers, the caverns, and the business that went on down there? My primary reaction was a sort of shame. My own fears felt less important to me than before, in comparison to the terrors that boiled beneath our feet.

Still, the whole thing seemed slightly unreal to me. I accepted that for Odorini tragedy was imminent...his daughter was clearly a willing participant in the morbid business below. She showed the dark luster of the doomed. She was pursuing her pointless end without any sign of healthy doubt. It was a very unhappy situation. But I found something terribly false in the theatrical settings, the contrived rituals, the vainglorious rhetoric — it distracted me, it made me think that the onrushing tragedy was *unnecessary*. A futile meaningless twitch of fate...not at all the stuff of good drama.

"Well," I said finally. "I would do what I could, but she doesn't seem to like me."

He waved his hands, an airy gesture of dismissal. "She knows nothing of you. Also, she is impetuous. Volatile. But fair, very fair. She will surely give you another chance to know her, if you will ask."

"I'll ask, if the opportunity arises."

"I am content," he said, with an invincible sincerity. It occurred to me that he might be a magnificent liar, or else an actor of extraordinary gifts. No, I told myself, Odorini was only the proprietor of a small restaurant. To imagine anything else was baseless paranoia.

We finished our wine, and I rose to go. "Perhaps," I said. "Perhaps she would allow me to fit a recorder to her. For her next hunt, for her next ride with the tide."

His eyes grew large with what seemed to be dismay. "Oh; no. You mustn't think of such a thing."

"It seems the central aspect of her life."

For the first time he showed a real and unmistakable anger. "That's a shallow thing to say, and false. She swims through a boiling night, pursuing monsters...this is the thing closest to the true heart of my Mirella? A little

girl who danced in the sunlight, who brought treasures to her father every day...flowers, seashells, bits of driftwood? Whose eyes were full of life's brightest delight? Who had the sweetest laugh I've ever in my long life heard? No, no, it's nothing but the foolishness of youth, that's all. But it's a foolishness she has no time to outgrow. Why would I want to remember her in the darkness?" There were tears in his eyes again, tears of rage or perhaps helplessness. He sank back slowly, took a deep breath.

"Besides," he said, in an abruptly careless voice. "You'd be breaking guild law — a capital offense. If you put a bug on her and she swims...." He shook his head somberly. "When the divers catch you, they'll skin you and leave you for the crabs. Or if they happen to be in a merciful mood, they'll just lash you to a rock and let the tide kill you."

I slept in my room until noon, and thereafter passed two days in unprofitable musing. I wandered the village, rubbed elbows with the tourists, took my meals at the Ripper Room.

I saw nothing of Odorini. When I asked after him, the staff at the restaurant gave no explanation for his absence, beyond bemused shrugs and professional smiles. I wondered where he lived, and how he amused himself away from the kitchen and the cash register.

But I thought many more times of his beautiful daughter Mirëlla. I remembered her long smooth swimmer's legs, her glossy mouth. The first night, lonely in my room, I considered knocking on all the doors in the hall, until I found her. Then I thought of going out to find someone else. In the end I spent the night alone, dreaming fitfully of darkness and turbulent waters...sometimes Odorini's clever old face floated through my dreams.

The next night I came home a little drunk, to find Mirella lying asleep on my bed. She wore her barbarian costume. Beside the bed was a bowl of whelks, cooked in an aromatic broth.

I stood over her for a minute, wobbly from drink and surprise. She slept like a child, without any of the guarded quality most adults display even in their sleep. Her mouth was open a little, and she sighed as she breathed. Sooty eyelashes flickered against her cheek; did she dream? I could for just an instant see the daughter Odorini moumed.

I sat down in the high-backed chair, making a small sound, and she woke. She didn't seem at all startled, she simply opened her eyes and looked at me.

"So the carouser returns early," she said, in the tone of a resumed conversation.

I signaled the exterior camera to move back, so that it recorded a view over my shoulder, looking down at the half-clothed woman in my bed. I glanced at my monitor to verify the framing; it was excellent.

"Very odd," she said. "What is it like...to live always in the camera?"

"I'm used to it," I said.

"I suppose you can get used to anything."

I shrugged. I didn't know why I was so reluctant to be civil. Perhaps I was still angry; no one likes to be called a coward, especially when it's true.

She sighed and sat up. "Well, my father sends you some of his favorite food." She lifted the bowl. "Will you try one?"

"I guess so," I said, a little dubiously. "The true adventurer is rarely intimidated by strange food."

She smiled crookedly — perhaps the result of the injury that scarred her jaw. "Perhaps you'll be disappointed; this is not so adventurous a dish."

The flavor was rich and savory, with a hint of smoke, a tingle of hot pepper. "It's very good," I said.

"The best ones come from the tidal caverns. I try to bring a few back for Odorini, whenever I don't kill."

She's still bringing gifts to her father, I thought, and somehow Odorini's forever-lost little girl came to life for me. Her tragedy seemed a bit more real, a bit more personal. We finished the dish in silence.

When we were done, she leaned back against the bed's iron headboard. Her naked legs seemed to reach most of the way to the foot of the bed. "You seem much less fearful tonight. Would you like to talk, now?"

No, I thought, I would like to do the other thing you suggested when first we met. But I nodded.

"Ask me what you like," she said. "I'll be more patient, this time."

"Why would that be?"

She smiled. "I'm calmer. Tomorrow night I swim the tide again. I've been a rockhopper for much too long...but I can wait a night and a day. And Odorini says you'll distract me."

"I'll do my best to be distracting," I said, attempting a gallantry. But she seemed not to notice.

"So, how may I satisfy your curiosity?" She spoke in a relaxed voice, without mockery.

I considered. What did I want to know? Ordinarily she'd be an excellent source of information — beautiful, exotic, vivid. But the situation wasn't ideal...usually I liked to happen upon my characters in colorful bars or other public places, so as to stimulate the sort of chance encounter that any of my fans might expect to have while traveling. This meeting was somehow tainted by a sense of contrivance. Unless, of course, I was actually trying to make a different kind of recording, unless I was actually going to deal with Odorini and his daughter as central elements. This might then work to my advantage.

"Would you be willing to wear a recorder while we talk?" I asked.

She raised her eyebrows. "Aren't you afraid to see yourself as I see you?" She was clearly no fool, for all she'd chosen a foolhardy career.

"No, I'm used to that sort of thing," I said, not very truthfully. "And perhaps you'll be kind."

She laughed. "Don't count on it. Yes, all right, I'll do it. Odorini will be grateful."

She sat motionless in the high-backed chair while I worked the leads up under her soft black hair. She didn't wince when the tip patches bit into her scalp. The transmitter, a capsule no larger than a grain of rice, lay just above the nape of her neck, well-concealed.

When I was finished, I waited for her to return to the bed, but she pushed me away and pointed to it. "You rest there for a while. It annoys me to have you always arranging your camera so as to peek up my breechcloth."

I made a feeble protest; she waved it away. "Never mind. Ask your questions."

I glanced at my forearm monitor; the framing was less felicitous now. Sprawled on the bed, I seemed vulnerable and awkward, without any of the grace she had displayed in the same position. She sat in the chair, leaning forward. The overhead light cast harsh shadows over her face, made her body seem too knotty with muscle. She had an almost brutal quality, which from all I knew of her was a falseness. "Lean back a little," I said, and she did, softening the shadows.

I adjusted the camera so that my head and shoulder bounded the image on two sides. I drew a deep breath and switched over into her viewpoint.

I felt first a singing tension, almost sexual, and indeed lust was a component, but it was only coincidentally directed at me, and tempered by

a vague expectation of disappointment. In that instant I saw that if I were to ask her to join me on the bed, she would do so...but without any special enthusiasm.

My pride stung, I switched out, and tried to control my expression. Apparently I was unsuccessful.

"Sorry," she said, and shrugged. "It's me, not you. My mind is on other matters."

"Doesn't matter," I muttered. "We'll talk of those other things."

"All right." She had remarkable poise for one so young.

"Why did you choose to become a diver?" I asked.

She smiled almost eagerly, and it came to me that she was happy to have an audience. "What could be better? No, I'm serious. Who burns as bright as the person who burns in the dark?"

I held back a laugh. "That has the sound of rhetoric, learned for occasions like this."

"You can think so. But there are far more dramatic divers than Mirella. You'd hear grander rhetoric from them."

"For example?"

"We are white-hot forges, burning away life, while Death pumps the bellows." She made a sour face.

"Pretty purple stuff. Who said that?"

"Roont, my usual lover. Actually that's one of his better lines."

"You're fortunate," I said, somewhat stiffly.

"Do you think so?" Her mouth quirked into a somewhat sardonic shape. I hastened to change the subject. "How long have you been a diver?"

"For almost three years."

"And how long do you plan to continue?"

She shrugged. "Until I die." She seemed matter-of-fact, without any of the bravado that usually accompanies such statements.

"When do you expect that to be?"

She shook her head and looked away. "Odorini thinks I'll die tomorrow. Because of my recent injuries."

"Do you agree?"

"No. I still have reserves. I'll last a while longer. I may not kill so frequently as I did in times past." She looked a bit ashamed, but determined.

I wished I hadn't asked. Looking at her, separate from all the gaudy self-

memorializing ritual of the caverns, I felt my detachment melting away, I felt some of the weight of Odorini's sorrow.

"Your father...I think he'll find it hard to live when you're gone."

"Now who's being dramatic?" she asked. "Odorini will survive. You have no idea what he's already lived through. He's very old."

"Has he always been a restaurateur?" I asked, thinking to find a less distressing subject.

"Oh, no," she said. She giggled, as if this were a completely ludicrous idea. "He was a great magnate on Firenza, before he moved here. He's still insanely wealthy; he could buy this whole planet on a whim."

Firenza? A strange thought came to me. My new publisher was chartered out of Firenza. Was there a connection?

She went on; apparently she hadn't noticed the sound of gears grinding in my head. "It's to his credit, really, that he doesn't just have me taken up and carried off to the nearest soul laundry for a new personality."

"Yes, I suppose so...." I muttered, still bemused.

"He's sentimental," she said. "And not attached to physical objects; with a new personality the old Mirella would be as dead to him as if a ripper had cut her into fishbait. Even if she looked the same."

"Oh," I said. I tried to put aside my suspicions. Would Mirella know anything about her father's schemes? If she did, would she tell me? Pointless to wonder. "Well then, tell me about the drug."

"What's to tell? They make it from the fish and sell it for enough money to make life easy." She wore a look of mild distaste.

"Do you use the drug when you dive?"

She jumped up, her distaste flashing into anger. "What a dreadful idea," she said, walking back and forth, looking as if she might bolt out the door at any moment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Maybe I was misinformed. I thought that many of the divers used the drug."

Her eyes flashed, her nostrils flared, and her lips drew back over strong white teeth. "Have you seen Loomp's collection of elderly divers? Those are the users. One day they grew too fearful to swim the tide, and took the drug. They never kill again. They never feel the glory again, only the shame. But since they don't fear the shame, they keep on diving and not killing, until at last the tide wizards take away their right to dive. Then they move offplanet,

or become mercenaries or tour guides. Finally they sit on Loomp's porch, without fear."

"I really don't understand...." I said.

"Clearly!" But she was calming a little; my bewilderment must have seemed genuine. "The fear is necessary; it drives out rational thought; without that freeing fear, who would try to kill a ripper? Only a mad person...and the mad divers rarely live long enough to acquire skill."

"I suppose I see what you mean, a little," I said.

She looked at me, her eyes still fierce. "My father was right; you're an innocent. I know you're afraid. Tell me: have you ever taken the drug?"

"No."

She smiled and pulled away her breechcloth. She knelt over me, beautiful and naked, frightening and strange. "Then I'll give you what I can, if you still want it."

**L**N THE HOURS that followed, I was always aware that the recorders were running, my greedy pleasure somehow increased by the thought that I would never forget the sensations of that night — that I would always be able to recall it with all the intensity that the memory deserved. When finally a glowing exhaustion came over me, I fell asleep without a care, pressed against her.

I woke at dawn and reached for her, to discover that she was gone. Anxiety stabbed through me. I had not removed Mirella's recorder. My stomach clenched and sweat slicked my body, even in the early-morning coolness. But my near-panic passed quickly; I told myself that I would soon find her and set matters right.

I lay in bed for a while, thinking about the night, and I had the impulse to rerun Mirella's track, to see if her passion had been as genuine as it seemed. No, don't be an idiot, I thought. At least not yet.

I breakfasted in a nearby café, so as to avoid the Ripper Room and the possibility of meeting Odorini. All indications were that he was an unconventional parent, one who might be tolerant of the night's events, or even pleased by them...but why risk unpleasantness?

When I returned to the house, Tsaldo Loomp was sweeping his terrace, and I went up to him eagerly. "Hello," I said.

"Hello, Citizen Mastine," he answered cautiously.

"Can you tell me, Citizen Loomp...which room is Mirella's? The diver?"

His face took on an opaque quality. "Mirella? What makes you think she lives here?"

I began to panic, a little. "I saw her in the hall the day I arrived. I assumed...."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Perhaps she was visiting one of the old divers. She lives below, in the caverns, like most of her kind."

I turned and set out for the Ripper Room, almost running. Odorini was gone, and the staff was unwilling or unable to contact him, no matter how I pleaded. I went to the Tourist Bureau, looking for another guide to the caverns. The woman behind the counter asked what I expected to see during the daytime.

"The divers. Or rather, one particular diver."

She shook her head tolerantly. "Impossible, sir. They rest now for the night, and we're not permitted to disturb them for any reason. Tonight is a Hunting Tide, didn't you know?"

"What...what if it's an emergency?"

She became uneasy. "I suppose you could talk to Tide Wizard Danolt, if it's really desperate. I warn you, however, he's a harsh man."

I went back to my room, trying to regain a degree of calm. The transmitter was a sophisticated device. In all likelihood, the barbarians in the caverns lacked the technology to detect its frequencies, and surely no one would actually see it. For all I knew I'd already committed a capital crime by allowing Mirella to take the transmitter below. Perhaps it would be safest to wait.

Night came to the Spine. I watched it darken the village, sitting on my balcony with a warm jug of wine and a head full of cold misgivings. I never really intended to watch Mirella's dive—though of course my recorders were picking up her signal. But finally I went in and set up the big monitor and put on the playback harness, thinking: why not?

She stood on the cliff face, looking down into the waves bursting against the stone. In one hand she held a swag of lights, the silvery globes hanging from cords. In the other she held her harpoon launcher. The Stormbringer Sea rolled in massively, great tumbling mountains of black water. The waves

never broke into surf; the cliff was too vertical to trip them. They were hammers wielded by gods, and the cliff shuddered under the impacts.

She glanced to each side. Dozens of other divers, dimly visible in the moonless night, waited on the cliff.

I could feel her fear; it made her shake and filled her limbs with weakness. But rising over the fear was an exultation that made her weightless. She almost believed she could rise from the cliff and fly swooping out over the ocean, and so did I.

She turned on her breather and bit down on the mouthpiece. She pulled down her mask, she shut her eyes and swung her arm in a sweeping arc, releasing her lights. She looked down, judged her moment, and sprang out into space.

As she fell, she thought: so much light fills the night, here above the water. The impact came, a moment of stunned transition, then her jets drove her deep, down into the furious darkness.

I began to understand why the divers used such extravagant language. I could not turn away, even for an instant.

Her lights followed her down the cliff face, each able to penetrate the murk for only a few meters, so that she saw the stone racing past in flickering instants. The lights swirled around her in close formation, and I realized she was somehow directing their movements.

The tide swiftly carried her into a greater darkness, and now she began to move horizontally, her jets pushing her faster than the tide. There was a great deal of turbulence at the tidal cavern's opening; she was flung about like a doll, unable for the moment to resist the tide or direct her movement. Then the current stabilized and she regained a fragile control.

I lost myself in Mirella's moment, my world narrowed to hers, the maelstrom of water and stone and the glimpses of other creatures hurtling past. Words could never convey what it was like.

In some almost supernatural way she detected the presence of a ripper. She sent her lights questing after it, like hounds, keeping only a pair to illuminate her own way. In the pursuit she several times bounced off the stone, bruising, lacerating impacts that would have incapacitated me, but she seemed not to notice the pain and shock. The fish fled the light's agony; she followed relentlessly, her jets whining loud enough to be heard over the rumble of the tide and the creak of the stone.

She cornered the fish in a side passage, out of the worst of the current, where it had the advantage in maneuverability. But the lights blinded and confused the fish, always distracting it just as it lunged at her, so that it missed her each time, until at last she fired her harpoon into it, a clean shot through the gills. She dragged it out into the tide, and soon passed into a large area of soft radiance, where the tide's velocity dropped.

She broke the surface of the Well to the cheers of her fellow divers, and there was room in her heart for nothing but joy.

I pulled the harness away, covered with sweat, gasping for air. Just for a moment, I believed that Odorini was wrong, that he had terribly underestimated the quality of his daughter's life, however short it might be.

They came for me in the morning, and I wasn't even surprised.

Teeg was one of them; he wore the uniform of the cavern guards. He locked my wrists behind my back with a steel bracelet bar, but he was careful not to hurt me. "You, Michael Mastine, an offworlder, are charged with a forbidden act." He spoke without rancor, and I even thought to detect a bit of pity in his hard dark face.

"It was an accident," I said, but no one answered me.

They put me in a small modern cell, where I waited for a day.

Then they took me to the cliff and tied me to the rock.

The sun is gone now and the waves send spray high up the cliff. The stone streams with cold water. I'm soaked and shivering. Soon, I suppose, the waves will break over me. I will hold my breath between each wave, waiting for the feel of air on my face so that I can take one more gasp. What will I feel when the air no longer reaches me, when I understand I've taken my last breath? I am paralyzed with raging shrieking fear; there's no room for anything else in my head.

I heard a rattle beside me and twisted my head, shocked by incredulous hope.

"I can't let you go," Mirella whispered. "They're watching." She wore her diving gear.

"Please," I said, "please."

"Hush," she said, and touched her hand gently to my mouth. "It does no

good. They're hard folk, the divers; they have their *rules*...at least for everyone else in the universe." But she took out a little knife and cut the filaments that held my upper body, so that at least I could sit up.

Spray choked me and I coughed, unable to say anything.

She held out a capsule. "The drug," she said. "You can save yourself from the fear."

I looked at her. "Show me another way. Can't you?"

Her pale eyes were the only thing I could see. "But you're so afraid," she said.

"I'm still alive," I told her, for some reason.

She regarded me silently, then began to unbuckle her breather harness. "Will you swim the tide?" she asked.

I thought of the terrible sea below, the black velocity of the trip through the tidal caves. For a moment, the climbing tide seemed an almost pleasant alternative, a death just below the twilight sea's surface, still full of light. "I'm afraid to," I said.

"Yes, of course you are...but will you dive? If you live, they'll let you go. You'll be a diver of sorts, immune to all the laws. And you might live; it's not impossible. I'll set the lights to globe you automatically; you won't have to control them. The tide rose too early tonight to bring the rippers into the Spine, so don't worry about them. There are other dangerous creatures, but stay away from the stone and they'll miss you." As she spoke she fitted the harness to me, loosening the straps here, tightening them there. "The jets react to your body language; keep your head up and your eyes open and you'll be able to see the stone in time to dodge."

She slashed my remaining bonds. She helped me to stand, she rubbed my muscles until feeling began to return. I steadied myself against her shoulder. She was warm.

"You must go soon," she said. "Once the tide reaches you, you'll be ground to bits against the cliff. You have to jump out as far as you can and then drive deep. Get into the first cavern you come to; don't tempt the sea monsters. Stay alive until you see the light of the Well."

She held up the capsule again. "Do you want it?"

"No," I said. "I want to live. I need the fear."

She laughed and threw it away. "Good," she said. She kissed me, a quick rough kiss that bruised. "Learn fast, then," she said, and led me to the brink. ☩



"You're lucky. I couldn't find anything off the rack.  
I have to have my suits custom made."

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## COMING ATTRACTIONS

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**B**ecause of our science fictional bent, we look to the future with anticipation. And there is much to anticipate in our July issue.

In the 1960s, Roger Zelazny published his award-winning, ground-breaking stories in *F&SF*. He returns to these pages for the first time in years with a wonderful science fiction story, "The Three Descents of Jeremy Baker." We believe it was worth the wait.

Another award-winner, Pat Murphy, provides the fantasy story for the issue. "Points of Departure" follows the story of Jan who hears wolves howling during the night of the blackout in Manhattan. Not human wolves either, but the real kind, the kind a person finds in the wilderness, not on the streets of America's most famous city.

Almost every story R. Garcia y Robertson has published in *F&SF* has been a cover story. "Gone to Glory" is no exception. This is a tale of terraforming and colonization. The story opens with a man named Defoe sitting in the Sad Cafe, drinking gin slings and contemplating the nude bathers in the low-g pool, when he's called to save a team on Glory. And things get strange from there.

Barclay Shaw used science fictional techniques — at least they would have been twenty years ago — to create the cover based on "Gone to Glory." Using his computer and a few tricks of his own, Barclay was able to create a 3-D image for the July cover. Just wait and see.

Future issues bring even more excitement. Ian Watson, Michael Coney, and Robert Reed will have cover stories. Nancy Springer, Andrew Weiner, and John Morressy will return with some of their best fiction. Jonathan Lethem, John Kessel, and James Patrick Kelly collaborate on one of the strongest political science fiction stories we've read in a long time. Note that prices will be going up with the July issue. The bind-in card in this issue is your last chance to enter or extend a subscription at the old prices. So use it today!

TERRESTRIAL,  
AQUATIC...WE'RE  
ALL MAMMALS-

EVEN

# DR. QUARK

HEY, RAFFLES—  
COME HERE!

SEE, DR. QUARK—THE DOLPHINS  
UNDERSTAND MANY THINGS WE  
SAY, AND THEY COULDN'T BE  
FRIENDLIER.

WE TRY TO GET THEM  
TO IMITATE OUR SPEECH—  
SAY 'HELLO—HELLO!'—  
BUT ALL WE GET ARE  
THOSE CONFUSED  
SOUND EFFECTS.

CLINKINIK  
SQUEEENIK  
WHISTLED

MAYBE BY ANALYZING A TAPE  
OF THEIR SOUND EFFECTS, I'LL  
COME UP WITH SOMETHING.

AH, HA—JUST AS  
I SUSPECTED

BASICALLY WHAT THEY'RE TELLING  
US IS WE TRIED TO TEACH THEM ENGLISH...

...BUT WE DIDN'T TRY  
TO LEARN **THEIR**  
LANGUAGE...UNTIL NOW.

DOLPHIN JOKES LOSE  
SOMETHING IN TRANSLATION,  
BUT IT SEEMS THAT TWO  
OCEANOGRAPHERS WENT  
INTO A BAR...

SQUEEE-EEREE  
EEKEEEEEEK  
CLINKINIK...

SQUEEEEEE



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